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VERDI:

Man and Musician

His Biography with Especial Reference to his English Experiences

By

Frederick J. Crowest

Author of

"The Great Tone Poets," etc.

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HAVE

Contributed so largely to an adequate appreciation

of the genius of

VERDI

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PREFACE

THIS work is an attempt to tell, in a popular key, the story of Verdi's remarkable career. A connected chronological account of this composer's life is needed; and a plain unvarnished narrative will best coincide with the temperament and habit of one who, throughout a long life, has been singularly abhorrent of pomp and vanity.

In the literature concerning Verdi, the great man's English experiences have been studiously neglected. We learn about Verdi in Italy, also in France; but scarcely anything is recorded respecting Verdi in England—the land which, more than any other country, served to make and enrich Verdi. It is to show more of the English side of the famous *maestro's* career that the present book is written. It may, probably will be, long years ere Italy will have another such son to worship. A tone-worker like Verdi is rare. Then, few great composers who have appealed

to the English public have lived to see their works received and appreciated to the extent that Verdi has; and it is unparalleled in the history of musical art, to find a musician, when a septuagenarian and octogenarian, giving to the world compositions which, for conception and freshness, far surpass the scores written by him in the vigour of middle age.

It would be ungracious indeed were I to neglect to express the very deep obligation which I am under to the illustrious *maestro* for the handsome and specially signed portrait which adorns this volume. Not less am I indebted to the Messrs. Ricordi for all the kind assistance and encouragement which they have afforded me during the preparation of this work.

F. J. C.

LONDON, *June* 1897.

CHAPTER I

BIRTH, PARENTAGE, AND CHILD-LIFE

Verdi's birth and birth-place—Dispute as to his township—Baptismal certificate—His parentage—The parents' circumstances—The *osteria* kept by them—A regular market-man—A mixed business—Verdi's early surroundings and influences—Verdi not a musical wonder or show-child—His natural child-life—Enchanted with street organ—Quiet manner as a child—Acolyte at Roncole Church—Enraptured with the organ music—Is bought a spinet—Practises incessantly—Gratuitous spinet repairs—To school at Busseto—Slender board and curriculum—First musical instruction—An apt pupil.

VERDI was born at Roncole, an unpretentious settlement, sparsely inhabited, hard by Busseto, which, in its turn, is at the foot of the Appenine range, and some seventeen miles north-west of Parma, in Italy. The red-letter day, since such it deservedly is, on which this universal melodist first saw the light was the 10th October 1813. Terrible events shadowed his infancy. In 1814 the village was sacked by the invading allies.

Then the frightened women took refuge in the church—safe, as they believed, near the image of the Virgin—until the soldiers forced the doors, and slew women and children till the floor reeked with blood. One woman, with infant at breast, flew to the belfry and hid there, thus saving herself and her child. The child was the infant Verdi!

Whenever a son of man is born into the world who, in the mysterious course of events, turns out to be what mankind calls "great," there is inevitably a community jealous to claim ownership of the illustrious one, alive or dead. The subject may have lingered through troublous long seasons, craving vainly for the stimulus of even scanty recognition. He has only to become "great" to find hosts of persevering friends. Verdi having risen to great eminence, more than one locality has claimed him. He has been styled "*il cigno di Busseto*,"[1] and "*il maestro Parmigiano*"; but he was neither the swan of Busseto nor the master of the town of

[1] Rossini used to be styled the "Swan of Pesaro," but in his old age he laughed at this compliment, and endorsed a Mass which he had composed as the work of "the old Ape of Pesaro," thus parodying the "swan" or *cigno* sobriquet which had been given him.

cheeses. Roncole alone is entitled to the sonship of Verdi; and as both Parma and her smaller sister town, Busseto, have disputed his parentage, the point of interest has been very properly investigated. The result is that the question has been decided once and for all. A certificate written in Latin has been traced, which establishes beyond dispute both the time and place of Verdi's birth. The following is the text of the original document:—

"Anno Dom. 1813 die 11 Octobris—Ego Carolus Montanari Praepositus Runcularum baptizavi Infantem hodie vespere hora sexta natum ex Carolo Verdi q^{m} Josepho et ex Aloisia Utini filia Caroli, hujus parocciae jugalibus, cui nomina imposui—Fortuninus Joseph, Franciscus—Patrini fuere Dominus Petrus Casali q^{d} Felicis et Barbara Bersani filia Angioli, ambo hujus parocciae."

This dog Latin, translated into English, runs as follows:—"In the year of our Lord 1813, on the 11th day of October, I, Charles Montanari, placed in charge of Roncole, did at the sixth hour of this evening baptize the infant son of Charles Verdi and Louisa Utini, daughter of Charles, married in this parish,

under the name of Fortuninus Joseph Franciscus. The sponsors were Father Peter Casali q^d Felicis and Barbara Bersani, daughter of Angiolus, both of this parish."[1]

The abode in which the infant Verdi first opened his eyes was one of the best known and most frequented among a cluster of cottages inhabited by labouring folk who found work and small wage in the immediate neighbourhood of Roncole, a three miles' stretch from Busseto. It was a tumble-down stone-and-mortar-mixture building of low pitch.

Padre Carlo Verdi and his good wife Luigia Utini were the licensed keepers of this small *osteria*, whereat wine, spirits, and malt, with their close relations pipes and tobacco, were matters of trade between Boniface or *la signora* and the frugal *contadini* who lived in and about Roncole. Wine and music! Another illustration of the curious union between harmony and alcohol—a connection which harmless as it really is, has been discouraged and taken fearfully to heart by a sensitive

[1] There is in existence another Certificate of this musician's birth. This is in the Registry of the *État Civile* of the Commune of Busseto for the year 1813, and is written in French, Italy being at the time under French rule.

sort of people, but which has never yet been satisfactorily disproved or accounted for by all the Good Templar philosophy. Bacchanalian aids were not the only commodities dealt in by the honest, though illiterate Carlo Verdi and his brave wife. The inn stood also as the local *dépôt* for such unromantic necessaries of existence as sugar, coffee, matches, oil, cheese, and sausage — all indispensable items in housekeeping, even in Italy.

The business air pervading the home of Verdi's childhood seems not to have affected his young mind, and, pecuniarily profitable as such an establishment for the sale of the liquids and solids of life may have been, the future musician does not appear to have shown any disposition towards becoming a vendor of unromantic necessaries or alcoholic unnecessaries of life. Happily, the fire of genius—the *feu sacré*—was in Verdi.

Verdi *maggiore* was distinctly a retail trader, running, with great good-nature, what are vulgarly known as "ticks" with the Roncolese. He went to market once a week, to buy in wholesale quantities grocery of one Antonio Barezzi, storekeeper, distiller, etc.,

who, as circumstances proved, was to figure prominently in the Verdi *dénouement.*

It is a sorry reflection that several of our greatest musicians have had poverty and untoward circumstances as a "set off," as it would seem to be, for their bounteous musical gifts. A study of the lives of the great tone poets will reveal the saddening but not astonishing truth that, while the world's fairest minstrels have been shaping melodies and harmonies to gladden hearts and brighten homes for all ages, they themselves have frequently been enduring lives of misery, and sometimes want. Verdi at no part of his career has ever been in abject poverty, but his was by no means a luxurious early life, nor was his home particularly predisposed towards music. At first, there was not a pianoforte in it, nor can it be said that Verdi passed his childhood amongst surroundings to favour the muse, such as the paint pots, canvases, and stage lights upon which Weber's young imagination fed. The social and physical conditions in and around Busseto were ill calculated to inspire the mind with anything approaching the sublime or the ideal, the poetic or the beautiful; and there seemed to be insuperable difficulties

in the way of the son of the chandler's shop-keeper ever becoming a musician of any importance. But many most surprising episodes were to unfold themselves. This unpretentious spot of Italian soil was to prove the cradle of the revolutioniser of Italy's national music-drama. To-day it is incontrovertible that in Verdi's music, especially in his later writings, there is far more than could ever have been expected of any Italian master. His melody is the pure chastened current of the sunny South, and no one of his countrymen has written loftier operatic music than that in *Aïda* and *Falstaff*. Much of the flow and beauty throughout his compositions must, of course, be accounted for by the inability of any Italian son of art to compose else but luscious melody, while the life and gaiety, together with that irresistible "go" which so distinguish Verdi's tunes and colourings, may have borrowed their genesis out of the lively times and good humour that prevailed at that earliest home—the inn.

The unsophisticated Italian loves music much as a lark loves liberty, and it is not in Italy, as it used to be here, regarded as degrading to aspire to being a *virtuoso*. No

other occupation is so natural to the son of the South as music, and although Italians are keen business people when they once taste commercial success — even if it be of ice-cream born—yet they make better musicians. Verdi senior did not press his son into the service of Orpheus, and no steps appear to have been taken towards forcing the offspring into becoming a manipulator of chords and cadences. Young Verdi enjoyed a perfectly natural child-life, playing with children indoors and out of doors until he was old enough to be sent to school. He was no forced exotic.

There is a feature sometimes attaching to the lives of great musicians which, happily, in the case of Verdi does not require to be put forward. He proved no wonder-child or prodigy who — adroitly boomed — made the round of Europe with advantage financially and corresponding disadvantage musically. From the outset his career has been perfectly legitimate, and free from episodes or situations partaking of the supernatural — no circumstances presenting themselves to impede his quiet progress along the artistic way which he seems to have been content to travel.

What will he become? This is the question, pregnant with blissful uncertainty, which nearly every decent parent has to ask himself of a young hopeful. Doubtless Verdi senior applied the interrogatory to himself respecting Giuseppe, but it has not transpired that the subject of the inquiry furnished much solution to the problem, beyond the fact that he was always overcome when he heard street-organ music. No sooner did an organ-grinder appear in Roncole, with his instrument, than young Verdi became an attentive auditor, following the itinerant musician from door to door until fetched away. This was the first hint he gave of musical aptitude, and probably no one would have predicted that he would one day furnish melodies, almost without end, for these instruments of torture in each quarter of the globe. One particular favourite with little Verdi was a tottering violinist known as Bagasset, who used to play the fiddle much to the little fellow's delight. This obscure musician urged the *osteria*-keeper to make a musician of his son, and is said to have received many favours from the son since he became famous. The old itinerant, very grateful, used to exclaim,

"Ah! maestro, I saw you when you were very little; but now——!"

The Verdi who was to create such streams of sparkling melody, and need an Act of Parliament[1] to stop them, was a quiet thoughtful little fellow as a child, possessing none of that boisterous element common to boys. That serious expression seen in the composer's face, the first impression that a glance at any of his present-day portraits would convey, was there when a child. Intelligent, reserved, and quiet, everybody loved him.

Perhaps it was this good and melancholy temperament that attracted the attention of the parish priest, and which led to Verdi's receiving the appointment of acolyte at the village church of Le Roncole. He was now seven years old, and it was in connection with his office as "server" that we are introduced to the first episode, a really dramatic one, in his career. One day the ecclesiastic was celebrating the Mass with young Verdi as his assistant, but the boy, instead of following the service attentively with the priest, which no acolyte ever does, got so carried away by the

[1] Mr. Michael T. Bass, M.P., "Bill for the Better Regulation of Street Music in the Metropolitan Police District."

music that flowed from the organ that he forgot all else. "Water," whispered the priest to the acolyte, who did not respond; and, concluding that his request was not heard, the celebrant repeated the word "water." Still there was no response, when, turning round, he found the server gazing in wonderment at the organ! "Water," demanded the priest for the third time, at the same moment accompanying the order with such a violent and well-directed movement of the foot, that little Verdi was pitched headlong down the altar steps. In falling he struck his head, and had to be carried in an unconscious state to the vestry. A somewhat forcible music lesson!

Possibly it was this incident, and the child's unbounded delight at the organ music which he heard in the street, that set the father thinking of his son's musical possibilities, for at about this time, 1820, the innkeeper of Roncole added a spinet or pianoforte to his worldly possessions. This indispensable item of household belongings was purchased for the especial benefit of the boy-child, thus pointing to some indications of budding musical aptness on his part. More soon followed!

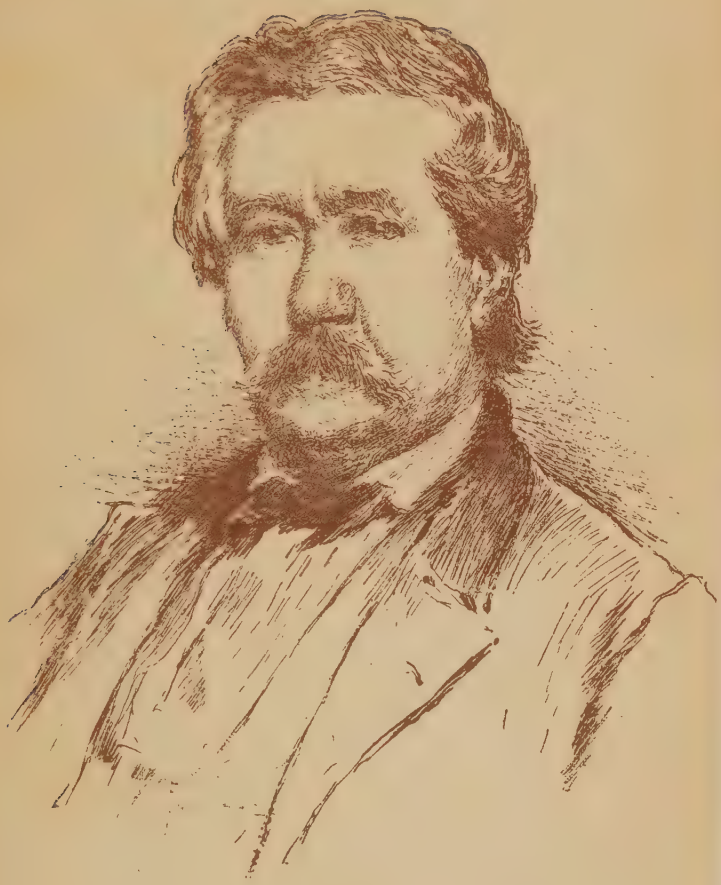
Young Verdi went to the instrument at all hours, early and late, playing scales and discovering chords and harmonious combinations. Sometimes he would forget or lose one of his favourite chords, and then there was an outburst of genuine native passion that stood in strange contrast to his usual quiet demeanour. A story goes that once, when he was labouring under one of these fits of temper, he seized a hammer and commenced belabouring the keyboard. The noise attracted the attention of his father, who stemmed his son's impetuosity with a sound box on the ears, which stopped the craze for pianoforte butchering. On the whole, however, every one was pleased with the little fellow's devotion to the instrument, and one friend went so far even as to repair it for him gratuitously, when it wanted new jacks, leathers, and pedals, which it soon did, owing to the boy's phenomenal wear and tear of the instrument. This spinet remained one of Verdi's most treasured possessions. It was stored at the villa at St. Agata, and no doubt has often recalled to the veteran's mind moments and feelings of his childhood. Inside it is an inscription, a testimonial creditable alike to the application

of the little musician as also to the goodness of the generous local tradesman, who, conscious, perhaps, of a future greatness for the child, had become one of his admirers. It runs: "I, Stephen Cavaletti, added these hammers (or jacks) anew, supplied them with leather, and fitted the pedals. These, together with the hammers, I give as a present for the industry which the boy Giuseppe Verdi evinces for learning to play the instrument; this is of itself reward enough to me for my trouble. Anno Domini 1821."

It was when he was about eight years of age that little Verdi's education became a subject for active consideration. His parents' deliberations ended in the resolve to send him to a school in Busseto. By virtue of an acquaintance with one Pugnatta, a cobbler, the future composer of the *Trovatore* and *Falstaff* was boarded, lodged, and tutored at the principal academical institution in Busseto, all at the not extravagant charge of threepence *per diem!* How this was managed history relateth not. Young Verdi's receptive faculties did not need to be severely extended, therefore, to spell "quits" to *padre* Verdi's generosity in the matter of letters and "keep"

for Giuseppe. After events abundantly prove that the little harmonist was not slothful in grappling the mysteries of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Whether, added to a fair knowledge of the three Rs, he, like most boys, made an acquaintance with another R, of pliable and impressive properties, is not known.

Concurrently with the scholastic training, Verdi's father provided some regular musical instruction for his son. The local organist of, and the greatest authority upon music in, Roncole was one Baistrocchi, and to him young Verdi was entrusted for the first training in music that he received. The terms for the music lessons were not extravagant, and were requited by a system of Dr. and Cr. account at the inn. Nevertheless, the instruction imparted was sound and solid, young Verdi proving smart at music. The measure of the musical merits of Baistrocchi has not transpired, and the world is uninformed as to whether he knew much, or little, musically; but whatever store of harmonious erudition was possessed by him he poured into his young charge. At the end of twelve months Baistrocchi felt bound to confess that Verdi



BAREZZI.

knew all that he had to teach him. Thus, either the teacher had an unusually small store of information to impart, or the student possessed an abnormal appetite for musical learning.

CHAPTER II

CLERK, STUDENT, AND PROFESSOR

Verdi goes into the world—Office-boy in Barezzi's establishment—Congenial surroundings—An exceptional employer—Verdi becomes a pupil of Provesi—A painstaking copyist—Verdi wanted for a priest—Latin elements—Appointed organist of Roncole—A record salary—Barezzi's encouragement of Verdi's tastes—Father Seletti and Verdi's organ-playing—Provesi's status and friendship towards Verdi—Milan training for Verdi—Refused at the *Conservatoire*—Experience and training needed—Study under Vincenzo Lavigna of La Scala—Death of Provesi, and assumption of his Busseto duties by Verdi.

When ten years of age, Verdi went into the world. Could the parent have foreseen the future that lay in store for his boy, he might have given him a little more learning, and have risked being a little the poorer. He saw nothing, however. His child had been to school, and could read, write, and add figures—an ample education for the son of a poor *locandiere!* Beside which the parents at no time entertained any greater musical

ambition than that their boy might, one day, become organist of the village church!

When the industrious parent used to trudge from Roncole to Busseto to replenish the "general" department of his business, it was to purchase from the wholesale grocer's store which, as we have seen, was presided over by Antonio Barezzi. It was a flourishing concern, and its owner was a fairly rich man. What was worth more than his money, however, was a good disposition and kindliness which endeared him to his traders. Verdi senior was an especially welcome visitor. With him the storekeeper gossiped, the conversation turning betimes upon the little fellow at home and his budding musical tendencies. Music and culture, it should be stated, were dear to Barezzi, and had placed him at the head of everything musical in Busseto. Thus he was President of the local Philharmonic Society, for which he held open house for rehearsals and meetings. Barezzi's instrumental ability was considerable, and he could perform on the flute, clarionet, French horn, and ophicleide.

As luck would have it, young Verdi was to be thrown into the service of this Barezzi. In the course of their gossipings, innkeeper had

hinted to merchant that the son would have to be bestirring himself; and Barezzi, having a vacancy for an office-boy, offered to try Giuseppe. The matter was speedily arranged, and the boy soon proved that he could make himself useful to Barezzi—merchant in spirits, drugs, drysaltery, and spices.

The average business man views a predilection for music, or indeed for any art study, as fatal to duty and discipline. Not so Barezzi. He encouraged the musical proclivities of the office-boy, and, as we shall discover, most generously and materially assisted him towards an inevitable artist career. In time he began to regard Verdi as one of his family, and allowed him the use of the pianoforte.

Let us see what happened. Without neglecting his daily duties in the office, young Verdi availed himself of every moment of spare time to add to his musical knowledge and practice. He seldom missed an opportunity of attending the rehearsals held in Barezzi's house, or the public concerts given by the Philharmonic Society under the conductorship of Giovanni Provesi, organist and bandmaster of the *duomo* of Busseto. In return Verdi copied the instru-

mental parts for the various performers, working at "string" and "brass" parts with a neatness and accuracy that quite won the hearts of those who had to play therefrom. Some people would declare such copying to be inconceivable drudgery, but young Verdi relished the excellent insight into orchestration which such practice afforded him. Provesi, on his part, was so pleased that he gave the lad some gratuitous instruction, of which Verdi took such advantage that at the end of two or three years the master frankly owned, like Baistrocchi, that the pupil knew as much as he himself did.

No wonder that Provesi, struck with the lad's musical promise, one day advised him to think of music as a profession. It so happened, however, that the lad just then was dangerously near to becoming a knight of the cowl instead of the *bâton.* The priests had got hold of him, and one ecclesiastic, Seletti by name, had commenced to teach him the Latin tongue, with the view, some day, of making a priest of him! Thus Verdi might have been for ever meditating in the cloister, instead of ministering to great demands, choreographic and otherwise, of a modern

lyric drama stage! "What do you want to study music for?" said the priest, at the same time backing up the query with the not very comforting nor accurately prophetic warning that he would "never become organist of Busseto"—a position which he did subsequently fill. "You have a gift for Latin, and must be a priest," was the confessor's parting shot.

Now the organist of Roncole died, creating a vacancy. Officialism and bumbledom, usually connected with organ elections, did not operate here. All concerned were agreed that, although young, the son of townsman Verdi was musically and morally fitted for the post, and he was thereto appointed. The salary was not overpowering, the exact payment being £1 : 12s. yearly! Thus the parents' wish was gratified, for their little son was duly appointed in Baistrocchi's stead, and from his eleventh to his eighteenth year Verdi performed his duties in the dusty old organ-loft at Roncole, supplementing his salary with small fees for such additional services as baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Every Sunday and Feast-day he trudged on foot from Busseto to Roncole to perform his

duties. Sometimes it was scarcely daybreak, and on one of these excursions he fell into a ditch, and would assuredly have been drowned, or frozen to death, save for the timely aid of a peasant woman, who had heard his groans.

How long Verdi remained in the employ of Barezzi has not transpired, but important subsequent events prove that he retained the friendship and esteem of the merchant long after being released of the tedium of bills and quantities calculations. He continued to receive musical training from Provesi until he was sixteen years of age, and it is not improbable that his generous employer, observing the musical inclinations of his clerk, allowed him to drift naturally into a harmonious haven. A story told of the young musician this while is ominous. It came to pass that Father Seletti, who would have the born-opera-composer a monk, was officiating at mass on an occasion when Verdi happened to be deputizing at the Busseto organ. Struck with the unusually beautiful organ music, the priest at the close of the service expressed a desire to see the organist. Behold his amazement on discovering his scholar whom he had been seeking to estrange from harmony to theo-

logy! "Whose music were you playing?' inquired Seletti. "It was beautiful." Verdi, feeling shy, informed the priest that he had brought no music with him, and had been improvising. "So I played as I felt," he added. "Ah!" exclaimed Seletti, "I advised you wrongly. You must be no priest, but a musician."

Provesi had an extensive musical practice in and around Busseto, to which he gradually introduced Verdi. More and more frequently he deputized for Provesi, and the sight must have been worth seeing, of the diminutive organist, fifteen years old, on the high seat in the great organ-loft in the dim cathedral of Busseto—all unconscious, as every one else was, of the great future before him. When, from advancing years, Provesi resigned the conductorship of the Philharmonic Society of the town, Verdi was unanimously selected for the vacancy. His chief delight was to compose pieces for the Society and to perform them. These early compositions are preserved among the *archives* of Busseto.

The master musician is not an easily moulded quantity. He has first to traverse the whole surface of musical science; even then,

Nature may have denied to him those gifts of colour and glow which are the wings of music, and lacking which, he may remain for ever a mathematical musical machine, too many of whom, loaded with academical degrees and distinctions, and the consequent array of scholastic millinery, have been given to the world.

Verdi's ambition was to become a successful opera composer, but ere he could succeed, there were branches of study which could only be mastered in an establishment such as the *Conservatoire* at Milan. To it Verdi's friends, notably Provesi (who prophesied that one day Verdi would become a great master), urged him to go. There was one undeniable obstacle — the money! This difficulty was, however, eventually overcome. One of the Busseto institutions was the "Monte de Pieta," which granted premiums to assist promising students in prosecuting their studies. Verdi's petition was sent up, and with the wheels of benevolent machinery turning, as usual, slowly, the decision was long delayed. At this crisis stepped in Barezzi, grocer and gentleman, as he proved, who agreed to advance the money, pending the decision of

the institution. This enabled Verdi to turn his face towards Milan. He did not forget the kindness, but returned Barezzi the money, in full, from the first savings he was able to make from his art.

It is a grim commentary upon the usual way of managing the things of this life, to witness a man who has made melody for the whole world for now over half a century being refused an entrance scholarship at the training institution of his own land! It is a fact, nevertheless, that Verdi was actually denied admittance to the *Conservatoire di Musica* of Milan, on the ground of his showing no special aptitude for music! Yet the world goes on, gaping and wondering at its monotonous mediocrity, while seven-eighths of its energy is being exhausted in repairing the consequences of the genius of its blunderers, who somehow are generally and everywhere in power, and rampant. Chiefly from shame, the rejection of Verdi at the *Conservatoire* has been industriously excused, but the mistake shall always stand to the discredit of Francesco Basili, the then Principal. Men like Verdi—men of metal—may be hindered, but are rarely defeated by obstacles, or long-refused

justice. Verdi had fixed his heart and eyes on a mark which he has never left, and in this respect, if in no other, he is a model for every earnest struggling student.

Verdi had now to look elsewhere for that training which he had hoped to obtain at Milan. "Think no more about the *Conservatoire*," said his friend Rolla to him. "Choose a master in the town; I recommend Lavigna."

Vincenzo Lavigna was an excellent musician, and conductor at the theatre of La Scala. To him, accordingly, Verdi went for practical stage experience and familiarity with dramatic art principles. This was in 1831, when the pupil was eighteen years old. Lavigna could not have desired a more exemplary pupil than Verdi was, and the master lost no time before taking his charge into the broad expanse of practical theatre work. All the drudgery of harmony, counterpoint and composition generally, had been learned and committed to heart long before; it was practice and experience in the higher grades of planning and spacing libretti, and the scoring of scenas and concerted numbers for operas, that Verdi needed. This Lavigna could and did give him. Verdi, on his part, showed such aptitude

for dramatic composition that Lavigna was greatly pleased. "He is a fine fellow," said Lavigna to Signor Barezzi, who had called to inquire as to the progress of his *protégé;* "Giuseppe is prudent, studious, and intelligent, and some day will do honour to myself and to our country."

The death, in 1833, of Provesi, the guiding musical spirit of Busseto, meant another episode in Verdi's career. By the conditions of the loan from the trustees of the "Monte di Pieta" of Busseto, he was to return home from Milan to take up Provesi's duties. Such a heritage of work, including the post of organist at the *duomo*, the conductorship of the Musical Society of Busseto, much private teaching, etc., kept Verdi well employed; but it did not deter him from a regular and assiduous prosecution of his operatic studies. He worked with an almost unbounded will and pride in Busseto. Why? Because there was present there a power which fired him with enthusiasm and ambition; otherwise the call from Milan might have been a difficult step for him to take; one word, however, will explain all—Verdi was in *love!*

CHAPTER III

COURTSHIP, MARRIAGE, AND FIRST OPERATIC SUCCESS

Verdi is engaged to Margarita Barezzi—His marriage—Seeks a wider field in Milan—An emergency conductor—Conductor of the Milan Philharmonic Society — His first opera, *Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio*—Terms for production—Its success—A triple commission—A woman's sacrifice — Clouds — Death of his wife and children—*Un Giorno di Regno* produced—A failure—Verdi disgusted with music — Destroys Merelli contract — The *Nabucco* libretto forced on Verdi—Induced to set the book — Production of *Nabucco* with success — Opposition from the critics — Mr. Lumley gives *Nabucco* in London—Its performance and reception.

When Verdi took the office stool in Barezzi's counting-house, there was little reason to suppose that he would get much beyond it; but he was to become something more than an *employé*. He was often invited to join the family circle, and so became acquainted with the eldest daughter, Margarita—a girl of beautiful disposition, with whom Verdi fell violently in love. The young lady returned his affec-

tion, and Signor Barezzi, with his usual kindly feeling towards Verdi, not opposing the engagement—albeit Verdi was extremely poor—the young people were married in 1836. Upon this occasion all Busseto turned out *en fête.*

Now had Verdi every incentive to work, for his young wife bore him a son and a daughter within two years of their marriage, and he longed for an operatic success that would add to his slender income. The prospect of a large family, and no means to support it with, was a painful piece of mathematics, the solution of which depended entirely upon himself. Alas! could he but have foreseen his almost immediate release from such love chains!

While thus musing, the fire kindled. Verdi made up his mind to relinquish working in Busseto and try his fortune in Milan. Accordingly, in 1838, he, with his wife and children, set out for that musical centre, carrying their belongings with them, and with his stock-in-trade—a score of a musical melodrama entitled *Oberto, Conte di S. Bonifacio*—under his arm. This composition was his first attempt at a complete opera. Every

pains had been taken with the score; and not only was each note Verdi's own, but the full score, and all the vocal and instrumental parts, had been copied out with his own hand. What labour! and yet the hard (we might say thick) headed man rejoices in the belief that musicians, big and little, are a lazy lot!

None too speedily, an opening presented itself at the Milan Philharmonic Society. Haydn's *Creation* was to be given, and the conductor had failed to put in an appearance. Suddenly Verdi was espied, whereupon Masini, a director, approached and begged him to take the conductorship that evening. In those days conducting was managed, not with a *bâton* and a rostrum, but from the pianoforte in the orchestra, and Masini considerately informed Verdi that if he would play the bass part merely, even that would be sufficient! Verdi acquiesced, and, amid starings and titterings, made for the conductor's seat and score. "I shall never forget," Verdi has said, "the sort of sarcastic approval that crossed the faces of the knowing ones. My young, thin, and shabbily-attired person was little calculated, perhaps, to inspire confidence." Yet Verdi astonished everybody. He gave not only the

bass line, but the whole of the pianoforte part, bringing the performance to a successful termination. Not from that night need he have been without an appointment as a musical conductor; indeed, it was shortly afterwards that the conductorship of the Milan Philharmonic Society was offered to, and accepted by Verdi.

Possessed almost by the demon of the stage, Verdi sorely wanted a trial for his opera. To obtain a first hearing then, however, meant the surmounting of considerable obstacles. The avenues of art were not open as they now are—when a season is made up almost wholly of "first nights," and when wealthy or well-backed aspirants can have, not only their own theatres, but their own critics, and even their own newspapers and audiences. Such is money! Eventually Verdi got what he wanted. *Oberto, Conte di S. Bonifacio* was to be produced at La Scala theatre in the spring of 1839; but even this arrangement was put off because a singer fell ill. Sick at heart, Verdi was retreating to Busseto, when the *impresario* of La Scala sent for him unexpectedly. Signor Bartolomeo Merelli had heard from the singers who had been studying

Oberto respecting the uncommon quality of its music, and the opinions of the vocalists Signora Strepponi and Signor Ronconi were not to be lightly regarded. The outcome of the interview was an agreement by which Verdi's opera was to be put upon the stage during the next season at Merelli's expense —Verdi in the meanwhile making certain alterations in the score, chiefly because of a change of artists from those for whom it was originally written. Merelli was to divide with Verdi any sum for which the score might be sold, in the event of the opera proving a success. He jumped at the offer, for in those days the fashion was for *impresarii* to demand, and to receive, large sums from unknown composers wishing to have their operas brought forward. *Tempora mutantur.* Nowadays the difficulty with managers is to find the talent! *Oberto* was duly produced on the 17th November 1839, the principal singers being Mesdames Raineri—Marini, and Alfred Shaw, while Signori Salvi and Marini filled the tenor and bass parts respectively. The opera saw several representations, and a further proof of its merit is seen in the fact that music-publisher Ricordi

gave Verdi two thousand Austrian liri, or about £70 sterling, for the copyright of the work.

Verdi's next experience was a commission. Shortly after the production of *Oberto*, *impresario* Merelli, who "ran" the Milan and Vienna opera-houses, approached Verdi respecting the composition of three operas—one every eight months, for the sum of £134 for each opera, with an equal division of any amount arising from the sale of the copyrights.

This contract came opportunely, for Verdi was on the verge of appealing to his father-in-law for a £10 loan wherewith to pay rent overdue for his modest apartment. Now, Merelli was asked to make an advance, "on account," but he would not. Weak and dispirited after a long illness, Verdi was greatly distressed at the thought of failing to meet his rent. Here, however, came man's blessed balm when desperate moments face him—in the womanly unselfishness of a brave wife. Seeing her husband's anxiety, Signora Verdi collected her trinkets, went out and raised money upon them, bringing it all to Verdi. "How she managed it," related Verdi afterwards, "I know not; but

such an act of affection went to my heart. I resolved not to rest until I had got back every article, and restored it to the dear one."

Cloud and sunshine, these are the alternating portions of the mortal's lot. No sooner did Verdi begin to feel easier at the prospect of earning some four hundred pounds by these three operas than his home was suddenly darkened. With the swiftness of a rushing avalanche all that was brightest in his home was swept away. Ere he could realise it, he had lost his wife, son, and daughter. Verdi tells the terrible story as only the sufferer himself can. "My bambino (little boy) fell ill early in April (1840), and the doctors failing to discover the mischief, the poor little fellow got weaker and weaker, and passed away finally in the arms of his mother. She was heart-broken. Immediately our little daughter was seized with an illness which also terminated fatally. This was not all. At the beginning of June my dear wife was cast down with brain fever, until, on the 19th, a third corpse was borne from my house. Alone! alone! In a little over two months three coffins, all that I loved and cherished most on earth,

were taken from me. I had no longer a family!"

Here was room for grief. What a situation for one tied by an agreement to compose a comic opera, the score of which was already overdue! It was impossible. Yet bills were flowing in, and to meet these Verdi must, despite all terrible anguish, fulfil his engagement. He did. Among the libretti which Merelli had submitted was one renamed *Un Giorno di Regno.* This Verdi set to music. It was produced at La Scala Theatre on the 5th September following his wife's death, and was a failure. No wonder that Verdi desponded, and begged of Merelli that he would cancel the agreement, which he did, tearing the document to pieces. Verdi's resolute intention was never to compose another note! Ah! By some force of fate Verdi, many weeks afterwards, quite by accident, stumbled across Merelli, and although the composer was still obdurate, ere the two parted a libretto by Solera was forced into Verdi's coat-pocket, upon the chance, as Merelli put it, of his looking at and being tempted to set the book.

Strange to say, this "Nebuchadnezzar"

libretto took hold of Verdi. Arriving home, the composer tossed the manuscript on to the table. It opened of itself at a truly felicitous passage, "Fly, O thought, on golden wings," which so interested Verdi that he read on. Finally, the whole poem was in his mind, and so disturbed his rest that he determined to return the book next day to Merelli. The *impresario* would not have it, and told him to take the libretto away and keep it until he could find the will to set it.

Nabucco was replete with beautiful passages, which, one by one, were set by Verdi, until, in the autumn of 1841, the entire opera was finished. Two stipulations Verdi now insisted upon. Signora Strepponi and Signor Ronconi were to sing in *Nabucco*, and the work was to be produced during the Carnival time. Merelli declared he could not manage the scenery in the time; but Verdi would not hear of waiting for new scenery, and consenting to risk the production with whatever chance canvas the resources of the theatre supplied, *Nabucco* found its way into La Scala bills for the 1842 season.

The opera was given on 9th March, and both Signora Strepponi and Signor Ronconi sang in it.

"With this score," subsequently related Verdi to Signor Giulio Ricordi, "my musical career really began. With all impediments and difficulties *Nabucco* was undoubtedly born under a lucky star. All that might have been against it proved in its favour. It is a wonder that Merelli did not send me and my opera to the devil, after the furious letter which I sent him. The second-hand costumes, made to look equal to new, were splendid, while the old scenery, renovated by Perrani, might have been painted for the occasion."

Nabucco took everybody by surprise. It was a species of melodic vein and choral combination that the Milanese dilettanti had never before heard; such instrumentation, too; such novel and impressive effects were not within the memory of the oldest *habitué* of La Scala. The Italians could not resist its peculiar "carrying-along" power. The work was unanimously declared the true ideal of what a tragic musical drama should be. Little wonder that during its rehearsals the workmen stopped to listen to the music of the new piece. Many years afterwards, in his success, Verdi referred to this incident in sympathetic words:—

"Ah!" said Verdi, "the people have

always been my best friends, from the very beginning. It was a handful of carpenters who gave me my first real assurance of success."

I scented a story, and asked for details.

"It was after I had dragged on in poverty and disappointment for a long time in Busseto, and had been laughed at by all the publishers, and shown to the door by all the impresarios. I had lost all real confidence and courage, but through sheer obstinacy I succeeded in getting *Nabucco*—so the title of *Nabucodonosor* is commonly contracted in Italy—rehearsed at the Scala in Milan. The artistes were singing as badly as they knew how, and the orchestra seemed bent only on drowning the noise of the workmen who were busy making alterations in the building. Presently the chorus began to sing, as carelessly as before, the '*Va, pensiero*,' but before they had got through half a dozen bars the theatre was as still as a church. The men had left off their work one by one, and there they were sitting about on the ladders and scaffolding, listening! When the number was finished, they broke out into the noisiest applause I have ever heard, crying '*Bravo, bravo, viva il maestro!*'

and beating on the woodwork with their tools. Then I knew what the future had in store for me."[1]

Some idea of the novel character of the *Nabucco* music may be gathered from the discovery that the usual chorus of La Scala was adjudged too small to give effect to it. Merelli, apprised of this, would not hear of increasing the staff because of the expense. Then a friend volunteered the extra cost. "No, no!" thundered in Verdi. "The chorus *must* be increased. It is indispensable. I will pay the extra singers myself." And he did! The success of *Nabucco* was remarkable. No such "first night" had marked La Scala for many years, the occupants of the stalls and pit rising to their feet out of sheer enthusiasm when they first heard the music. "I hoped for a success," said Verdi; "but such a success—never!"

The next day all Italy talked of Verdi. Donizetti, whose melodious wealth had swayed the Italians, as it subsequently did the English, was among the astonished ones. He had deferred a journey in order to hear *Nabucco*,

[1] Dr. Villiers Stanford in *The Daily Graphic*, 14th January 1893.

and was so impressed by it, that nought but the expressions; "It's fine! Uncommonly fine!" could be heard escaping his lips. With *Nabucco* the impressionable Italians were agreeably warned that a master-mind was amongst them.

Verdi sold the score of *Nabucco* to Ricordi for 3000 Austrian liri, or £102, of which, by the terms of the contract, Merelli the *impresario* was to share one half. He generously returned Verdi 1000 liri.

In the year 1846 *Nabucco* was brought to London. Mr. Benjamin Lumley elected to open the season with it. Her Majesty's theatre had been newly painted and embellished, and all London was on the tiptoe of excitement at the prospect of the inauguration of the new *salle*. No more striking novelty than *Nabucco* could have been selected, perhaps, since the work had already become popular on the Continent, and had in some places created a *furore*. The English public, it should be stated, already knew Verdi through *Ernani*, which opera, as the reader will learn later on, had been performed in London the previous year, and had startled the susceptibilities of our critics. The object in presenting this *Nabucco* by Verdi was

to afford the public an opportunity of a further judgment upon the ear-arresting composer of *Ernani*. In obedience to a prevalent sentiment precluding the slightest connection of a Biblical subject with stage representation, *Nabucco* had to be rechristened. It received the *alias* "*Nino, Re d' Assyria*," and was brought forward.

"In a popular sense," writes Mr. Lumley, "the opera was a decided success; the choral melodies especially suiting the public taste. The libretto, although faulty in many respects, was dramatic, and afforded scope for fine acting and artistic emotion. *Nabucco*, in short, floated on the sea of the Anglo-Italian stage where, whilst one current was always rushing towards novelty, another tended to wreck all novelty whatever, in the interests of so-called 'classicism.' Much had been done to place the opera with splendour on the stage, but though it pleased on the whole, no decided success attended the venture of the two new ladies. Sanchioli, wild, vehement, and somewhat coarse, attracted and excited by her 'power, spirit, and fire,' but she failed to charm. As a 'declaiming, passionate vocalist' she created an effect; but the very qualities

MARGHERITA BAREZZI.

which had rendered her so popular with an Italian audience, acted somewhat repulsively upon English opera-goers. The lack of refinement in her style was not, in their eyes, redeemed by the merit of energy. The electric impulse that communicated itself to the Italians, fell comparatively powerless on the British temperament. Sanchioli, however, was in many respects the 'right woman in the right place' in this melodramatic opera. The other lady, Mademoiselle Corbari, though destined in after times to please greatly as an *altra-prima* on the Anglo-Italian stage, and though she was considered from the first charming, even 'fascinating' in her simplicity and grace, was not yet acknowledged as a leading vocalist. The nervousness and inexperience of a novice, which she showed at that stage of her career, somewhat lessened the success due to a sweet voice and feeling style, though the prayer allotted to her character Fenena, was encored nightly. Fornasari pleased those who remained of his old enthusiastic admirers, by his emphatic dramatic action and vigorous declamation, and thus far worked towards the success of Verdi's opera."[1]

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 145 (Lumley).

The libretto of *Nino* or *Nabucco* is based upon the history of the Assyrians and Babylonians at the epoch when these two nations were distinct. Ninus, the son of Belus, the first Assyrian monarch, is engaged in exterminating the Babylonians. He profanes their temple, insults their faith, and finally falls a victim to the vengeance of Isis. He goes mad. His supposed daughter, Abigail, obtains possession of the kingdom, to the exclusion of his lawful heiress, Fenena, who is about to be sacrificed with the Babylonians, whose faith she has embraced, when Ninus, repenting of his evil deeds, recovers his reason in time to save her from death, and the drama winds up with the submission of the proud monarch and his whole court to Isis.

"This opera," wrote a capable critic at the time, "the first by which the young composer achieved his exalted reputation, and which has been received abroad with enthusiasm, is a most remarkable work. It is characterised by merits of the highest order. This is shown in the splendid finale of the first act, commencing with the charming *terzettino* which has been for some time already a

favourite with English dilettanti; the canon preceding the punishment of Nino, in the second act; the duet '*Oh! di qual onta*' between the latter and Abigail in the third act, in which the voices are made to combine in the most exquisite manner; the charming chorus, '*Va, pensiero*,' flowing and plaintive; and the final prayer '*Terribil Iside*,' sung without instrumental accompaniment. These *morceaux* require to be studied in detail for their beauties to be fully appreciated; but they nevertheless produce, at first hearing, an effect which pieces abounding, as they do, in imagination and remarkable excellence of construction, do not always obtain. They are more highly characteristic. The opening chorus, '*Gli arredi festivi giu cadono infranti*,' is severe and characteristic, and altogether peculiar in its construction. The first aria of Orotaspe is very remarkable in point of composition. The first part of the solo of Abigail, which is much admired, did not produce at first hearing any deep impression on ourselves; the second part is very good, and characteristic of the vengeful Amazon. The prayer for soprano at the end of the opera, '*Oh, dischinso e il firmamento*,'

is a charming little bit of melody. In fine, in the music of the opera the composer has shown himself possessed of all the legitimate sources of success. It bears the stamp of genius and deep thought, and its effect upon the public proved that its merits were appreciated."[1]

This favourable view, however, was far from being endorsed by all the leading critics —inasmuch as it was with *Nino* that Verdi experienced more of his early and remarkable castigations in the English press.

Henry Fothergill Chorley, English musician, art critic, novelist, verse writer, journalist, dramatist, general writer, traveller, etc., was musical critic of the *Athenæum* from 1833 to 1871, a period which covers Verdi's career down to the production of *Aïda*, and it is fair to assume, therefore, that the contributions, signed and unsigned, which appeared in the *Athenæum* were the views and expressions of that gentleman—deceased. James William Davison, English composer and writer (1813-1885), was musical critic of *The Times* to the day of his death, so that that gentleman, also deceased, may be credited with the emanations

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 14th March 1846.

respecting Verdi and his doings which appeared in its columns. Now, when *Nabucco*, in its Anglicised form as *Nino*, was produced here, the former critic wrote: "Our first hearing of the *Nino* has done nothing to change our judgment of the limited nature of Signor Verdi's resources. . . . Signor Verdi is 'nothing if not noisy,' and by perpetually putting his energies in one and the same direction, tempts us, out of contradiction, to long for the sweetest piece of sickliness which Paisiello put forth. . . . He has hitherto shown no power as a melodist. Neither in *Ernani* nor in *I Lombardi*, nor in the work introduced on Tuesday (*Nino*) is there a single air of which the ear will not lose hold. . . . The composer's music becomes almost intolerable owing to his immoderate employment of brass instruments, which, to be in any respect sufferable, calls for great compensating force and richness in the stringed quartette. . . . How long Signor Verdi's reputation will last seems to us very questionable."[1] Of these remarks we would say that Verdi and his reputation both live to-day!

It need hardly be pointed out that the

[1] *Athenæum*, 7th March 1846.

critical faculty in its perspicacity and highest degree are wholly wanting in this criticism. Verdi has shown himself to be a born melodist; his reputation for his melodies has been great and world-wide, even those of such early operas as *Ernani* and *I Lombardi* are still with us—to wit, that lovely excerpt "*Come poteva un angelo*" from the latter work; while the orchestral excessiveness charged to him, thus early, was just the thing for which thirty years later, when *Aïda* was produced, he was by many musical minds declared to be indebted to Wagner, and abused consequently.

The Times criticism on *Nino* was less despairing. "The melodies" (we were told) "are not remarkable, but the rich instrumentation, and the effective massing of the voices do not fail to produce their impression, and a 'run' for some time may be confidently predicted."[1]

Mr. Lumley revived *Nino* (*Nabucco*) towards the close of his memorable and vicissitudinous management. It was during the 1857 season. Mademoiselle Spezia made a decided mark in the part of Abigail, but the

[1] *The Times*, 4th March 1846.

object of interest was Signor Corsi, who made his *début* on the occasion.

"This celebrated singer," Mr. Lumley informs us, "had acquired so high a reputation in Italy as the legitimate successor to Georgio Ronconi, in the execution of lyrical parts of dramatic power, that the liveliest curiosity was excited by his first appearance."[1] Signor Corsi failed, however, to establish his claim to public favour either as a singer or actor. Curiously enough, this same season witnessed the production of the work under the name of *Anato* by the rival London opera company, under Mr. Gye, at the Lyceum Theatre.

Nowadays we hear little of *Nabucco.* The world can well afford to go on with one opera the less, even though it be a good one; but fifty years have worked a vast change in operatic values, and, although the revival of *Nabucco* might not be called for now, it must not be forgotten that, when it first appeared, it was, as an able critic has put it, "almost the only specimen the operatic stage has of late years furnished of a true ideal of the tragic drama."[2]

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 416.

[2] *Musical Recollections of the last Half-Century* (1850 Season), May 31.

Much that *Nabucco* contained demonstrated the fully-trained composer, the scientific musician, and the able contrapuntist. The splendid chorus "*Gli arredi festivi*," sung by all the voices, and taken up by the basses alone; the charming chorus of virgins, "*Gran Nume*," beginning *pianissimo* and swelling up to a glorious burst of harmony; and the grand crescendo chorus *Deh! l' empri*, these manifested indisputable originality and learning. Other notable numbers proved to be the chorus "*Lo vedesti*," and the "*Il maledetto non ha fratelli*" movement; while the *canone* for five voices, "*Suppressau gi' istanti*," the *scena*, "*O mia figlia*" (which Fornasari was wont to render so feelingly), and the duet "*Oh di qual onta aggravesi*," are remarkable examples of characteristic musical composition, sure indications of greater artistic triumphs by their author. Among the many orchestral points of *Nabucco*, the harp accompaniment in the Virgins' chorus, and the employment of the brass instruments in the great crescendos are particularly novel and effective. Little wonder that such a work struck the keynote to Verdi's future greatness.

CHAPTER IV

SUCCESS AND INTRODUCTION INTO ENGLAND

Verdi's position assured—Selected to compose an *opera d' obbligo*—The terms—*I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*—Its *dramatis personæ* and argument—Reception at La Scala—A new triumph for Verdi—*I Lombardi* in London, 1846—*Ernani*—Political effect of *Ernani*—Official interference — Verdi first introduced into England — Mr. Lumley's production of *Ernani* at Her Majesty's Theatre —The reception of the opera—Criticism on *Ernani*—*Athenæum* and *Ernani*.

Now, at the age of twenty-nine years, was Verdi's future practically assured. His ambition had been to produce an opera that would win the applause of his countrymen. This was attained sooner, perhaps, than Verdi expected it. With this desire more than fulfilled, the son of the obscure innkeeper of Roncole was being talked of in the same breath as the *maestri* Donizetti, Mercadante, and Pacini. Would that his beloved wife and children could have been with him to have shared this success!

A great honour was now to be his. By the vote of the La Scala Theatre direction, Verdi was chosen to be the composer of the *opera d'obbligo* for the Carnival time — that new opera which an *impresario* is bound, by the terms of his agreement with the municipality, to find and produce during each season. Merelli conveyed the news to Verdi, tendering him a blank agreement form and saying, "Fill it up; all that you require will be carried out."

Verdi consulted Signora Giuseppina Strepponi, the young and attractive tragèdienne who had performed so admirably as Abigail in *Nabucco* (she afterwards became Madame Verdi). Her advice to the composer was to "look out for himself," but to be reasonable, suggesting similar terms to those paid to Bellini for *Norma*. Verdi asked, therefore, eight thousand Austrian liri (£272 sterling), and the bargain was struck.

Within eleven months Verdi was on La Scala boards with his fourth opera, a work which deserves lengthy notice because of the hold it has always had over English audiences. Signor Solera had prepared what, from an Italian point of view, was an excellent libretto,

based upon a poem by Grossi, covering the epoch of the First Crusade. The *dramatis personæ* of *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* ran :

Pagano, Arvino, sons of Pholio, the Prince of Rhodes; Viclinda, wife of Arvino; Griselda, daughter of Arvino; Acciano, tyrant of Antioch; Sofia, his wife; Oronte, his son; Prior of the city of Milan; Pirro, armour-bearer to Arvino; monks, priors, people, armour-bearers, Persian ambassadors, Medes, Damascenes, and Chaldeans, warriors, crusaders, ladies of the harem, and pilgrims.

The scene of the first act is laid in Milan; the second in and near Antioch; the third and fourth near Jerusalem.

Briefly, its story or argument is this. Pagano and Arvino are the sons of one of the Lombard conquerors of Rhodes. Pagano, deeply enamoured with Viclinda, and enraged at her preference for his brother, attacked, wounded him, and then fled his country. As the curtain rises, the monks and the people are seen assembled before the Church of Ambrose, in the island of Rhodes, to celebrate the return of the pardoned culprit. He arrives, and his injured brother cordially for-

gives and embraces him. But in the heart of the latter the same unquenchable feelings still rankle. He once more meditates the destruction of his brother and the possession of his sister-in-law. At night he invades, with an armed band, his abode; but in the dark he mistakes his victim, and kills his own father instead of his brother. Remorse takes possession of his heart, and he flies to a wilderness in Palestine to expiate his crime, and under the garb of a hermit he acquires a great reputation for sanctity. Years of repentance have elapsed; it is the moment when all Christian knights and princes have been summoned to the First Crusade, and Arvino and his followers have landed in Palestine, obedient to the call of Peter the Hermit. Here he soon hies to the holy recluse (Pagano) in his mountain retreat, seeking from the hermit counsel and consolation in his sorrows, for the Saracen chief of Antioch, in the conflict, has carried away his daughter. Pagano, concealed by his garb, promises a termination to his brother's sorrows which he knows he can effect; for Pirro, formerly his squire and confidant, now a repentant renegade, has promised to yield Antioch, where

he holds a command, to the Christian bands. In that city Griselda is immured; she is in the harem of Oronte, but protected by his mother, Sofia (secretly a Christian), and passionately loved by her son, who, under the double influence of love and conviction, determines to become a convert to her faith. Griselda forgets her Christian friends, and listens but too fondly to the vows of her Saracen lover; but Antioch is betrayed to the Christians, led by Arvino and Pagano; all the Saracens are put to death; and Griselda, by her lamentations over the fate of her true lover, brings down on her head the wrath of her father. In the retreat where she has taken refuge from his anger, her lover, Oronte, who has escaped from his enemies, reappears in the disguise of a Lombard. The lovers fly together, but being pursued by the Christians, Oronte receives a fatal wound; Pagano comes and takes him to his cell, and there the Saracen prince dies a Christian convert; whilst Griselda in her despair, through divine interposition, is consoled by a vision of Paradise. Pagano, who has become the guardian spirit of his injured brother, accompanies him to the siege of Jerusalem, and is wounded to death in de-

fending him. As he dies, he removes his cowl and reveals his name. His death forms the final catastrophe of the opera.

On the 11th February 1843, crowds were flocking to the Milan Theatre to hear *I Lombardi*—the new opera by the composer who had driven the remembrance of Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini from the heads of the Milanese. Unusual interest was aroused because the authorities, suspecting political suggestions, had sought to stop the representation of the opera. The people even brought their provisions with them, and when the moment for the performance came, a frightful odour of garlic pervaded the theatre! The patriotic subject pleased everybody, and the rendering had not proceeded far before undoubted expressions of approval issued from all parts of the house. The feverish audience detected readily exact analogies to their own political circumstances. Verdi, "saviour of his country," as some would have it, had kept up the sentiment of the *Nabucco* music—a sentiment which had an unmistakable revolutionary flavour and ring, soon to be mightily emphasized—and the issue was never in doubt. Soloists, chorus, and orchestra quickly had

their feelings echoed by the Milanese public at large.

Another triumph. Moved by the stirring music and the unstinted exertions of the principal singers, Signora Frezzolini and Signori Guasco and Derivis, the auditors were so overcome that they re-demanded number after number. The clamouring for the quintet was such that the police interfered and would not suffer it to be repeated; then the chorus, "*O Signore dal tetto natio,*" in the fourth act brought the listeners once more to their feet; nor would they be appeased until they had heard it three times.

If only for its fortuitous association with the awakening of Lombardo-Venetia to a sense of national unity and independence, this opera must always be interesting. But *I Lombardi* abounds in vocal treasures, and contains some of Verdi's best early work. Take, for instance, the lovely tenor *cavatina* "*La mia letizia infondere,*" and the *cabaletta* "*Come poteva un angelo,*" which Oronte sings in scene 2 of the second act, and which Signor Gardoni used to render with much charm and beauty of voice. Little

wonder that such melodies and music predisposed the Italians towards the new young musician.

I Lombardi was certainly an advance upon *Nabucco.* Apart from its political associations, it contained vocal and instrumental attractions which the public were justified in expecting from the composer of *Nabucco.* It met with a *succés d'estime* only on its production in London, but this had more to do with party feeling in operatic matters at the time than with the actual merits of the work. The new and striking properties which distinguished *Nabucco* were still more marked in *I Lombardi*—so much so, indeed, that it has survived many operas and can be listened to with pleasure to-day.

In the 1846 season—Tuesday the 12th March—Mr. Lumley gave the subscribers of Her Majesty's Theatre *I Lombardi,* with the artists Grisi, Mario, and Fornasari, and scenery and dresses which at the time were considered unsurpassed. It was the first performance of Verdi's new opera in this country.

"Here was again a success!" writes Mr. Lumley; "nay, a great and noisy success—

but yet a doubtful one. After the comparative unanimity with which *Nabucco* had been received, it seemed necessary for the forces of the opposition to recommence the attack against a school which now threatened to make its way with the town. Party spirit on the subject was again rife. Whilst, by the anti-Verdians, *I Lombardi* was declared to be flimsy, trashy, worthless, the Verdi party, and the adherents of the modern Italian school, pronounced it to be full of power, vigour, and originality. The one portion asserted that it was utterly devoid of melody—the other, that it was replete with melody of the most charming kind; the one again insisted that it was the worst work of the aspirant—the other, that it was the young composer's *chef d'œuvre*. And in the midst of this conflict—so analogous to the old feud between the parties of Gluck and Piccini—public opinion, as usual, seemed undecided and wavering, uttering its old formula of, "Well, I don't know." The music, too, was weighed down by a rambling, ill-constructed, uninteresting libretto; and it is really difficult, under such conditions, to sunder the merit of the musical "setting" from the merit of the

text. *I Lombardi*, however, was played frequently, and to crowded houses."[1]

I Lombardi speedily travelled over Europe. As we have seen, it soon reached England, and having been adapted for the French stage, it was produced on the 26th November 1847 at the Grand Opéra of Paris under the title of *Jérusalem*. In its new garb, it was a failure, despite splendid singing and effective scenery. What a farcical proceeding, then, to attempt to foist this version upon the Italians under the name of *Jerusalemme!*

It is not surprising that Verdi was now sought after by *impresarii* and managers, ever on the outlook for talent and a work that may restore the too often distorted fortunes of a theatre. More than one European manager was beseeching him; but eventually the management of the Fenice theatre secured Verdi's next opera. This proved to be *Ernani*, produced on the 9th March 1844. Verdi chose his own subject, and entrusted Victor Hugo's drama to Piave, who subsequently became the composer's permanent librettist. The result was a tolerably good book, which Verdi set in happy vein. Its first night decided its

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 148.

fate. *Ernani* was received with unstinted admiration and approval. The artists who created the parts were Signora Loewe (Elvira), who quarrelled with Verdi about her part; Signor Guasco (Ernani); and Signor Selva (Silva), the latter a singer whom the noble who owned the Fenice thought unworthy to appear on his boards, despite Verdi's recommendation, because he had been singing at a second-rate theatre!

During the nine months following the first performance of *Ernani*, it was produced on no less than fifteen different stages.

One or two episodes—amusing, if vexatious—attended its production. The police got wind of some exciting element in the opera, and stepped in at the last minute, objecting to several numbers, and refusing to allow a sham conspiracy to be enacted on the stage. Verdi had to give way and face the additional work and trouble; yet, after all, the Venetians got political capital out of the work, and when the spirited chorus, "*Si ridesti il Leon di Castiglia*," burst forth, their patriotic feelings overcame them. Another incident had to do with artistic principle. In the last act Silva had to blow upon the horn; but a susceptible aristo-

crat could not bear the idea, and remonstrated with the composer, urging that it would desecrate the theatre!

Ernani, as we have remarked, was the work by which Verdi was first introduced to the British public; and it is, therefore, of especial interest to English readers. It involved a dispute among musical people such as has only been equalled by the famous Gluck and Piccini feud (1776) just referred to, or that great controversy engendered by Wagner's music and doctrines, the wrangle that gave us the term "music of the future," that spiteful innuendo which the enemies of the master invented to indicate the fit location of his music, and which epithet Wagner himself adopted as exactly describing an art and teachings which a debilitated and distempered age was too feeble to understand.

No one was more concerned in this musical stir than the zealous and assiduous Mr. Lumley, who had his heart and fortune in the affairs of the opera-house, Her Majesty's Theatre:—

> Industrious importer! who dost bring
> Legs that can dance, and voices that can sing,
> From ev'rywhere you possibly can catch 'em;
> Let others try, they never yet could match 'em.

The stumbling-blocks were the bigoted lovers of the old school, who, dissatisfied with all that had been given them, were, like that hero in fiction, always clamouring for "more," which, when obtained, they always pronounced unsatisfactory. "The season," states Mr. Lumley, "was announced to open with the *Ernani* of Verdi, a composer as yet unknown to the mass of the musical English public. But he had been crowned triumphantly, and had achieved the most signal successes in Italy. *Ernani* was generally pronounced, at that period, one of the best, if not the best, of his many applauded operas. It would have been strange if the announcement of the first production of one of Verdi's works upon the Anglo-Italian stage had failed to excite the attention and interest of the musical world. At all events, it was the duty, as well as the policy, of the management to bring forward the greatest novelty of the day. Novelty sure to be called for with indignant remonstrance if *not* laid before the subscribers, however it might be scouted (according to custom) when it did make its appearance.

"After some unavoidable delay, the season

opened on the 8th March (1845) with the promised opera of *Ernani.* That it excited the general enthusiasm awarded to it so lavishly in Italy cannot be asserted; that it was a failure may be emphatically denied. The general result of this first introduction of Verdi to the English public was a feeling of hesitation and doubt; or, as some one drolly said at the time, the 'Well, I don't know's' had it! The English are tardy in the appreciation of any kind of novelty, and the reception of Verdi's opera was only in accordance with the national habit. It is well known that a taste for this composer's music has survived all the opposition of an earlier period, and that he is now generally popular among the musical amateurs in this country. Whatever their intrinsic merits, his operas have achieved a widely-spread success, as provincial theatres and music-halls can testify throughout the land; and there can be no doubt that, whatever his alleged shortcomings in some respects, he has at command passion, fire, and strong dramatic effect.

"On the first production, then, of *Ernani*, the public seemed as yet unprepared to give a verdict of its own as to the merits of

the young composer, now first placed in England on his trial."[1]

The principal singers at this first representation in England were—Madame Rita Borio, *prima donna;* Moriani, the tenor; Signor Botelli, baritone; and Fornasari, as the old Castillian noble. The audience, if not the critics, were delighted with the work. The characters so musically individualised, the new and attractive orchestration, the *motivi* distinguishing the singer, the perfect *ensemble*, the well-proportioned whole opera—all these thoroughly Verdinian characteristics were seized upon and admired. "Encore followed encore from the rising of the curtain. . . . Solos, duets, and trios were applauded with equal fervour, but the concerted pieces created the most surprise and admiration. . . . The *ensembles* possess a novelty and an impassioned fervour unprecedented."[2]

In a retrospect of the season's opera, a talented critic wrote of *Ernani* as follows:—"We were then introduced to a composer engaging in Italy surprising popularity, one whose works have been brought out at almost

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 102.
[2] *Illustrated London News*, 15th March 1845.

all the great continental theatres, whose productions in his native country met with the most enthusiastic admiration—Verdi. It cannot, therefore, be wondered at that the present able management of Her Majesty's Theatre should have fixed upon the works of this composer to bring before the English public. *Ernani* did full justice to its brilliant reputation. It presents the real type of the lyrical tragedy, where feeling finds its appropriate expression in music. Musical judges allotted to it the palm of sterling merit, but the leaning of public taste was against the probabilities of its obtaining here the high favour it has elsewhere enjoyed.

"The meritricious sentimental style of the modern school to which, of late years, we have become so accustomed was a bad preparation for the full appreciation of such work as this. *Ernani*, however, at first only half understood, gradually worked its way into the public favour, and was given a greater number of times than any opera of the season; finally, it might be pronounced completely successful; but yet, on the whole, the result of the production of this opera was not such as to

encourage the management to substitute another work of this composer, *I Lombardi*, for more established favourites. We are sorry for this; we grieve to see in the English musical public so little encouragement for novelty in art, and an unwillingness to patronise works which have not received the sometimes questionable fiat of approbation from the audiences of former seasons, not a whit more infallible than the present. English audiences will rarely judge for themselves in matters of art. They wail that Fashion should have openly set her seal on works which should claim a fair and unbiassed judgment.

"At present Verdi is the only composer of real and sterling merit in that land of song (Italy); for though Rossini still lives, his pen is idle, or only occasionally employed on short compositions of a totally different nature from those with which he has for years delighted the world. . . . Donizetti, his successor, is silent. Should *Ernani* or any other work of this young composer be brought forward next year (1846), its success will probably be far more decided; for attention has become awakened on this point, and a purer musical

taste is gradually forming in England, as elsewhere."[1]

Ernani was brought forward in the following year, when one among the few critics not antagonistic towards Verdi wrote as follows:—

"It was with much pleasure that we heard *Ernani* again. This opera is of that stamp which constantly gains upon the mind. The two *finales* of the first and second acts are *chef d'œuvres* of composition. When the ear has become sufficiently accustomed to their sounds to follow the varied melodies introduced to them with such wonderful skill, the effect is indescribable. The sensations called forth by such music as this, when listened to with unswerving attention, are far more profound, though of a different nature, than those elicited by the hearing of the most pleasing melody. Combinations of the human voice and of instruments must always, if skilfully managed, produce a powerful effect, and this is especially the case with these two *finales*, in which every bar has a meaning, and in which consequently, at each hearing, some fresh beauty is revealed. . . . The duet between Ernani and Elvira,

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 23rd August 1845.

the trio at the end of the opera, and the aria '*Ernani involami*' are also deserving of much admiration."[1]

Ernani was conceived in much the same vein as *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*. It was on the continental Italian opera lines, as seen in the operas of his countrymen before him. The personality of Verdi was somewhat more emphatic, but the national model had not been left either in form or in expression. "Full of plagiarisms as was every number of that opera," records one of the divided, distracted critics, "it took more or less with the public because of the large amount of tune with which it abounded, whilst the constant succession of passage after passage in unison excited some degree of curiosity on account of its novelty."[2]

Undoubtedly *Ernani* was an advance upon *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi*. In 1848 this opera came again under the notice of the censor of the *Athenæum*, but it did not tend to alter his views respecting Verdi musically.

"It is not many years," we read, "since

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 21st March 1846.

[2] *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. ii. p. 162.

Signor Verdi was in this country, among the myriad strangers who are attracted by the 'season,' struggle vainly for a hearing, and retire unnoticed. . . . For new melody we have searched in vain; nor have we even found any varieties of form, indicating an original fancy at work as characteristically as in one of Pacini's or Mercadante's or Donizetti's better cavatinas. All seems worn and hackneyed and unmeaning. . . . '*Ernani! Ernani! involami*,' is a song of executive pretension, written apparently for one of those mezzo-soprano voices of extensive compass which poor Malibran brought into fashion. There is a good deal of what may be called pompous assurance, both in the *andantino*, and in the final movement, and an accomplished singer could doubtless work an encore with it. Signor Verdi's concerted music strikes us as a shade worthier and more individual than his songs. . . . We cannot conclude these brief remarks, incomplete for obvious reasons, as a judgment, without saying that flimsy as we fancy Signor Verdi's science, and devoid as he seems to be of that fresh and sweet melody, which we shall never cease to relish and welcome, there is a certain aspiration in his

works which deserves recognition, and may lead him to produce compositions which will command success."[1]

This could hardly be styled encouraging criticism on a work which had, and has since been received with the greatest success throughout Italy, in Paris, and in London, and which has enjoyed a legitimate and fairly enduring popularity, remembering always how changeable a thing opera at its best is. Adolphe Adam, writing of *Ernani* in Paris, has said, "Of all the operas of Verdi represented in Paris, *Ernani* is the one which has obtained the most success. I cannot say why, for I am quite as fond of the others, and I do not think this success is to be attributed especially to the excellent execution it has received."[2] The obvious and only conclusion being that the music itself was the true operating force.

[1] *Athenæum*, 26th February 1848.
[2] *The Life and Works of Verdi* (Pougin—Matthew), p. 169.

CHAPTER V

FIRST PERIOD WORKS

I Due Foscari—Its argument—Failure of the opera in Rome, Paris, and London — *Giovanna d' Arco* — A moderate success—*Alzira*—*Attila* — More political enthusiasm—*Attila* given at Her Majesty's Theatre by Mr. Lumley—Its cool reception—*The Times* and *Athenæum* critics on *Attila* — Exceptional activity of Verdi — *Macbeth* — *Jérusalem* in Paris—*I Masnadieri* first given at Her Majesty's Theatre—Jenny Lind in its *caste*—Plot of the opera—The work a failure everywhere—The critics on *I Masnadieri*—Mr. Lumley offers Verdi the conductorship at Her Majesty's Theatre—*Il Corsaro*—*La Battaglia di Legnano*—*Luisa Miller*—Mr. Chorley on *Luisa Miller*—Its libretto—Reception of the work in Naples, London, and Paris.

I Due Foscari was Verdi's next opera. His *collaborateur* Piave had a libretto well seasoned with that sensational element characteristic of the Italian dramatic lyric stage. Here is its story :—

In 1423 Francisco Foscari was raised to the ducal chair of Venice, notwithstanding the opposition of Peter Lorredano. The latter constantly opposed him in the Council,

and that in such a manner, that on one occasion Foscari, irritated, exclaimed, "He could not believe he was really Doge so long as Peter Lorredano lived." By a fatal coincidence, a few months afterwards, Peter and his brother Mark died suddenly, and public report said they had been poisoned. James Lorredano, Peter's brother, believed the tale, and sculptured the names of the Foscari on their tomb, and inserted them in his ledger as his debtors for two lives — waiting with the greatest *sang-froid* for the moment when he should be enabled to make them pay. The Doge had four sons; three died, and Jacopo the fourth, husband to Lucretia Contarini, being accused of receiving presents from foreign princes, was imprisoned according to the laws of Venice, first at Naples in Romania, and afterwards at Treviso. It happened in the meantime that Ermolaus Donato, chief of the Council of Ten, who had condemned Jacopo, was assassinated on the night of the 5th November 1450, on his return to his palace, from a sitting of the Council. As Olivia, Jacopo's servant, had been seen at Venice a few days previously, and on the very day after the crime had been com-

mitted he had publicly mentioned it at the Mestra boat, suspicion fell on the Foscari. The master of the boat and Jacopo's servant were immediately carried to Venice, where they were put to the torture, but in vain; they were then banished for life to Candia. For five years in succession had Jacopo sought for his pardon without obtaining it, and, unable longer to live without revisiting his beloved country, he wrote to the Duke of Milan, Francisco Sforza, begging of him to intercede with the Council on his behalf. The letter fell into the hands of the Ten; and Jacopo, being taken to Venice and tortured, confessed that he had written it with the sole desire of revisiting his country, at the risk of being sent back to prison. He was condemned to remain for life in Candia, to be closely confined for the first year, and threatened with death if he wrote any more letters of the same description. The unfortunate octogenarian Doge, who had conducted himself with Roman fortitude at the judgment and torturing of his son, was allowed to see him in private before his departure, to advise him to be obedient and resigned to the will of the Republic. In the meantime Nicolo Errizo, a Venetian noble-

man, died, and on his death-bed acknowledged himself the murderer of Donato. He wished his confession to be published to exculpate Jacopo Foscari. Several of the principal senators had previously felt disposed to plead for his pardon, but unhappily, while this was taking place, he breathed his last in his Candian prison.

The miserable father lived in solitude with a heart full of sorrow; he was seldom seen at the Council. Jacopo Lorredano, in the year 1457, was raised to the dignity of Decemvir, and believing that his hour of vengeance had arrived, carried on his plots so secretly that the Doge was forced at last to abdicate his ducal chair. Twice in the course of the time he held the office Foscari had wished to resign it, but so disinclined were they to yield to his wishes that they obliged him to swear that he would die in the exercise of his power.

Notwithstanding this, he was compelled to leave the ducal palace, and returned, as a simple individual, to his private residence, refusing a large pension offered to him from the public purse.

The 31st October 1457, while listening to the sound of the bells announcing the election

of his successor, Pascal Malpiero, he was so violently affected that he expired. He was buried with as great splendour as if he had died a Doge, while Malpiero was attired merely in the simple dress of a senator. It is said that Jacopo Lorredano, when this took place, wrote in his ledger opposite the words we have already mentioned the following sentence—"*The Foscari have paid me!*"

Out of this argument was evolved a serious opera in four acts, which was produced at the Argentine Theatre at Rome on the 3rd November 1844. It proved a complete failure. Though composed immediately after *Ernani*, it possessed little of the spontaneity and freshness of that work; so little that the Romans were astounded, and stayed away from the theatre.

In 1846 the work was given in Paris, when Signori Mario and Coletti, with Madame Grisi, sought to establish the opera; but the work would never "go."

The year following Mr. Lumley introduced it at Her Majesty's Theatre for the opening night of the season. "The opera given for the first time in this country, the *Due Foscari* of Verdi, and the singer, Madame

Montenegro, a Spanish lady of good family, with a clear soprano voice of some compass, and an attractive person, pleased, without exciting any marked sensation. Coletti, in the character of the *Doge*, one of his most famous parts, was, by general accord, pronounced to be an admirable, not to say a great, artist; while Fraschini, by his energy and power, contributed to the effect of the *ensemble*."[1]

Yet again was the work a failure. The English operatic public, however, did not want a new opera just then. What it sorely needed was Jenny Lind!

Giovanna d'Arco, produced at La Scala Theatre, Milan, on the 15th February 1845, and in which Erminia Frezzolini appeared, "in all the brilliancy of her radiant youth, of her patrician beauty, of her incomparable voice, and of her marvellous talent,"[2] followed *I Due Foscari*. It was a temporary success, owing to the admirable exertions of the Tuscan cantatrice, whose personal and musical charms considerably aided the exalted part of the heroine. She inspired not a

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 180.
[2] *The Life and Works of Verdi* (Pougin—Matthew), p. 92.

little fervour, something akin probably to that remarkable enthusiasm prompted by the woman-soldier of France, whose imperishable doings saved the throne of Charles VII.

The opera contained several fine numbers, but although the Milanese received it kindly, nay, went out of their way to *fête* its composer, it never really "took." Some of Verdi's best writing is to be found in *Joan of Arc*, yet it was not born under a lucky star. Its overture was rescued, and this Verdi (Handel-like) affixed to his operas *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* and *Aroldo.*

Alzira, produced with indifferent success at the San Carlo Theatre at Naples on the 12th August 1845, succeeded *Giovanna d'Arco*, and then came *Attila.* This was Verdi's most successful work since *Ernani.* The management of the Fenice had bargained with Verdi for another opera, and *Attila* was the result.

The scene of the opera is placed principally at Aquileja, a Roman colony on the Adriatic, which from its grandeur was honoured by the ancients by the appellation of "Roma Secunda." Attila, having overcome and desolated this great city, amidst his rejoicings is surprised by

a band of Aquilejan virgins led by Odabella, daughter of the Lord of Aquileja, who has been killed in the battle. She defies Attila, who, struck by her beauty, asks what boon he can bestow upon her. She claims his sword, intending to avenge her father's death—to behave, in fact, as Judith did to Holofernes. But she falters, and returns to the barbarian camp, the object of Attila's admiration. Her lover, Foresto, and Ezio, the leader of the defeated Romans, reappear, and plan the poisoning of Attila, for which purpose the services of Odabella are sought. She, however, has consented to share Attila's throne, but hardly are the nuptial rites celebrated than she is upbraided by Foresto and Ezio. Then a revulsion of feeling overcomes her; she thinks of her father, her lover, and her country, and in a fit of despairing anger she stabs Attila to the heart.

Poet Solera supplied the libretto, and when, on 17th March 1846, an expectant audience thronged every part of the theatre, it was to listen to the unfolding of an excellent work. The warmth of its reception surpassed that accorded to *Nabucco*, and again was political fire aroused within the Venetians.

The opera soon went the round of the Italian stages, and two years later (1848) *Attila* was brought to London. Mr. Lumley at Her Majesty's Theatre was straining every nerve to provide attractions that would interest his critical (also let it be added, hypercritical) subscribers, and counteract the opposition from the rival "Royal Italian Opera" enterprise at Covent Garden Theatre. For his ante-Easter season he paraded *Attila*—"the opera" as he says, "in which I had first heard and been charmed with the rich voice and dramatic qualities of Sophie Cruvelli at Padua. This was, in fact, the opera in which she first appeared upon any stage. None, perhaps, of Verdi's works had kindled more enthusiasm in Italy or crowned the fortunate composer with more abundant laurels than his *Attila*. Its fame was great in the native land of the composer. In catering for novelty, therefore, the director of Her Majesty's Theatre must be held to have done well in producing a work of so great repute, and in placing before his subscribers the leading opera of the day upon the Italian stage. To prove with what good will this was done, the opera had been 'mounted' with great scenic

splendour, and with every 'appliance' likely to produce effect. *Attila* was produced on Tuesday the 14th March. Cruvelli sang '*con fuoco.*' Her fine, fresh, ringing voice 'told.' Beletti displayed unusual histrionic talent, besides all that steadiness and excellence of 'school' which helped to earn him his reputation in this country. Gardoni was in the cast, whilst Cuzzani accepted a second tenor part. On every side were zeal, talent, and good-will employed successfully to execute a work which many cities of Italy had pronounced to be Verdi's masterpiece. But although Verdi had already commenced to make his way to English favour, and this by means of that vigour and dramatic fire which unquestionably belonged to him, the public displayed an unwonted unanimity of sulkiness upon the production of *Attila.* They would have 'none of it.' Consequently *Attila* proved a failure. Music and libretto displeased alike."[1]

"This is one of Verdi's more recent operas," wrote a critic, "and met in Italy with the success which works of his (almost the only composer of eminence left to that land

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera* (Lumley), p. 214.

of music) are sure to command. The work itself possesses the beauties and defects peculiar to Verdi—a certain grandeur of conception and power of dramatic effect is even more striking here than in many other of the *maestro's* compositions. There is a warmth, spirit, and energy in the music which carries away the listener, which excites and inspires; at the same time there is a want of softness and repose which is, in this opera, more than usually perceptible. The too frequent use of the drums and the brass instruments is the great fault we have to find in this work."[1]

The *Attila* music was as horrible to the senses of the *Athenæum* critic as was that of *Nino*. "As for the music," we are informed, "were we to carry out and apply Charles Lamb's principle of being 'modest for a modest man,' the fit review thereof would be a charivari. The force of noise can hardly further go; unless we are to resort to the device of Sarti's cannon, fired to time his Russian 'Te Deum' on the taking of Ocsakow, or imitate the anvil chorus which Spontini, we have heard, introduced in one of his operas. It is something to have touched the limits of

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 18th March 1848.

the outrageous style; but this, we think, we have now done, unless the more recent *Alzira* and *Macbeth* of the composer contain double parts for the ophicleides or like extra seasonings. . . . The melodies are old and unlovely to a degree which is almost impertinent, and *I Masnadieri* itself was not more devoid of the discourse which enchants the ear than this Gothic opera. May we never hear its like again."[1]

Again we find *The Times* less "sweeping" respecting *Attila*, albeit not detecting promise of that grand future which was before Verdi, and which his great genius, his own unaided efforts—amid such remorseless critical opposition—have enabled him to attain.

"Less excelling in melody than any Italian composer of name," we read of Verdi, "he has always chosen to rely rather on the effect of the ensemble than on the isolated displays of the principal singers. His love of ensemble is, however, not attended by any great contrapuntal knowledge. The effects that he produces rather arise from an increase of the mass of sound than from skilful harmonious combination. . . . That the arias, duets, etc.,

[1] *Athenæum*, 18th March 1848.

should be commonplaces, mere repetitions of Donizetti and Bellini and Verdi himself, was naturally to be anticipated, as he is rarely strong in such *morceaux*. But there is a want of dramatic colouring, even in his ensemble; and for the most part we discern little apprehension of character, and little regard to the peculiarities of situation."[1]

In the light of subsequent events such criticism is not perspicuous. If Verdi had no "contrapuntal knowledge" and "lacked dramatic colouring" power at the age of thirty-two, after learning his art, when and where did he acquire all that tremendous wealth in these departments as seen in *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*, and even in earlier operas? Is it not probable that Verdi knew more about the matter than the critics, and understood better than they what the public wanted, what it could swallow, and composed accordingly? Was the musical taste in this country such, for instance, fifty years ago, that opera-frequenters would have relished even *Otello?* Verdi was probably right in giving a sick patient a pill, not a horse-ball.

In 1847 a spell of unusual industry

[1] *The Times*, 15th March 1848.

overtook Verdi. Opera after opera came with remarkable rapidity. *Macbeth* was produced at Florence in March 1847, and immediately proved a success. It was Verdi's first effort with a Shakesperian subject. The Florentines were unanimous in their approval of the music, the interpretation of which was considerably aided by an admirable Lady Macbeth—Signora Barbieri-Nini. The score was taken to Milan, and pleased so much that the Milanese, among other doings, represented Verdi practically as having crushed all other Italian composers; while poor Rossini in particular was, dragon-like, under the foot of his great rival! Subsequently, the work was given in Venice, where it met with a reception which Verdi himself could scarcely have expected. It was just before the Revolution of 1848, and when Palma, as Macduff, sang the air:—

> "*La Patria tradita*
> *Piangendo e' invita*";

it so excited the Venetians that they joined in to the full of their voices and showed such other manifestations of uncontrollable feelings, that not only the police, but the military had to be called in.

The composer was now due with an opera for Mr. Lumley; a work to be written expressly for England, and *I Masnadieri* was the result. That persevering and to-be-pitied *impresario's* version of the affair runs thus:—

"Of the expected new operas to be produced on the stage of Her Majesty's Theatre, that of Verdi alone remained available. For many years I had been in correspondence with the young Italian composer, for the purpose of obtaining from him a work destined for the London boards. An opera on the subject of "King Lear" had already been promised by Verdi, the principal part being intended for Signor Lablache. But, on that occasion, the serious illness of the composer had prevented the execution of the design. Verdi now offered his *I Masnadieri*, composed upon the subject of Schiller's well-known play, *Die Raüber*, and with this proposal I was obliged to close. On Thursday, 2nd July 1847, *I Masnadieri* (after wearying rehearsals, conducted by the composer himself), was brought out, with a cast that included Lablache, Gardoni, Colletti, Bouche, and, above all, Jenny Lind, who was to

appear for the second time only in her career, in a thoroughly original part composed expressly for her. The house was filled to overflowing on the night of the first representation. The opera was given with every appearance of a triumphant success; the composer and all the singers receiving the highest honours—indeed, all the artists distinguished themselves in their several parts. Jenny Lind acted admirably, and sang the airs allotted to her exquisitely. But yet the *Masnadieri* could not be considered a success. That by its production I had adopted the right course was unquestionable. I had induced an Italian composer, whose reputation stood on the highest pinnacle of continental fame, to compose an opera expressly for my theatre, as well as to superintend its production. More I could not have done to gratify the patrons of Italian music, who desired to hear new works. It may be stated in confirmation of the judgment of the London audience, that *I Masnadieri* was never successful on any Italian stage. The libretto was even worse constructed than is usually the case with adaptations of foreign dramas to the purpose of Italian opera. To

Her Majesty's Theatre the work was singularly ill-suited. The interest which ought to have been centred in Mademoiselle Lind was thrown on Gardoni; whilst Lablache, as the imprisoned father, had to do about the only thing he could not do to perfection—having to represent a man nearly starved to death."[1]

Poor Mr. Lumley! For the benefit of a generation who will not set eyes on Signor Lablache, it should be stated that he was of Herculean proportions, a giant in height, and so portly that he made a superb Falstaff. His voice shook the walls of Her Majesty's Theatre, and he had a heart as big as some men's bodies.

It is well to know something of this "excessive" book. Two brothers, Carlo and Francesco, are the sons of Maximilian Moor, an old Bohemian noble. The younger brother Francesco is envious of the fortunate first-born, and poisons his father's heart against him. Carlo driven from home, joins a robber band, and Francesco impatient to reap the fruits of his wickedness seeks to accelerate the old man's death by telling him that his first-born has met with his death. Francesco's

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera*, p. 192.

next scheme is to implore Amalia, the betrothed wife of Carlo, to marry him, but she resents his odious suit. Quite by chance she meets Carlo, to whom she tells everything, and as he, in one of his raids in the forest, has discovered his father almost starved to death in a cave, the desire for vengeance cannot be restrained. He summons his co-outlaws, who swear to avenge the wrongs of the infamous Francesco. This done, Carlo reveals himself to his father and bride, but the horrible revelation that he is a robber does not hinder their sympathy and tenderness towards Carlo. Amalia offers to marry him just as he is, bound by oath to outlawry. This is impossible. Maddened by despair, he thrusts his poniard into her bosom, and thus meets her appeals for relief by death. Thus ends this most tragic story; the music keeping pace with the varied emotions of horror, of melancholy, and tenderness, which the subject alternately excites.

There were beautiful numbers in *I Masnadieri*, or "The Brigands," notably the grand scena "*Tu del mio Carlo al seno*," with its *cabaletta* "*Carlo Vive*," which Jenny Lind could sing entrancingly; the duet between

Amalia and Francesco; the air "*Lo, squardo,*" deliciously accompanied by the wind instruments; the quartet "*Tigre feroce*"; the tenor air "*O mio castel paterno,*" wherein Gardoni's beautiful voice, and manner, were so noticeable; the trio in which the superlative powers of Jenny Lind, Gardoni, and Lablache were united; and, to name one more number, the air "*Volasti alma beati,*" with its beautiful harp accompaniment. Notwithstanding many attractions, it was a dead failure, and only kept the boards two or three nights. "*I Masnadieri,*" an authority afterwards wrote, "turned out a miserable failure, as it deserved to do, since it could but, at all events, as was rightly said, increase Signor Verdi's discredit with every one who had an ear, and was decidedly the worst opera that was ever given at Her Majesty's Theatre, the music being in every respect inferior even to that of *I Due Foscari.*"[1]

All the critics did not decry the opera. Writing of *I Masnadieri* the *Illustrated London News* said of it:—"The story is in many respects a horrible one; it represents

[1] *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. ii. p. 195.

passions and crimes which, if they are unhappily not untrue to human nature, are yet better excluded from theatrical representation, and cannot be considered as within the scope of the tragic art; with all this, however, for the groundwork of an opera it is exceedingly effective, and admirably suited to the character of Verdi's music, which is here dramatic in the extreme, and somewhat excels the masterpieces of Meyerbeer and other composers of the German "Romantic School" of music. . . . The opera was highly successful. The talented *maestro*, on appearing in the orchestra to conduct his clever work, was received with three rounds of applause. He was called before the curtain after the first and third acts, and at the conclusion of the opera amidst the most vehement applause. The house was crowded to excess, and was honoured by the presence of Her Majesty and Prince Albert, the Queen-Dowager, and the Duchess of Cambridge."[1]

I Masnadieri gave the leaders of public musical taste another chance—a legitimate opportunity which they did not fail to embrace. The opera was one of those decided failures

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 24th July 1847.

which occur betimes in every walk of art, very often giving the lie direct to the maker's estimate of his work. Gounod, for instance, used constantly to express, and has done so within our hearing, that *Mireille* was his best opera. Yet the public has set its seal upon *Faust*, a work that has brought more money to impresarial coffers than any other opera that could be instanced. Who has heard *Mireille*, compared with the thousands who have listened to the beautiful and picturesque music of *Faust*, elevating in its very loveliness? *I Masnadieri*, to quote the *Athenæum*, "at all events, must increase Signor Verdi's discredit with every one who has an ear. We take it to be the worst opera which has been given in our time at Her Majesty's Theatre. . . . There is not one grand concerted piece—a condition hard upon a composer whose only originality has been shown in his concerted music. . . . The performance must be recorded as the failure of a work which richly deserved to fail, in spite of much noisy applause."[1] "Since our last," continued the *Athenæum* in a subsequent notice, "*I Masnadieri* has been played and sang twice. Surely

[1] *Athenæum*, 24th July 1847.

the question of our good (or bad) taste in rejecting *Il Maestro* as an authority is finally settled, and the field is left open for an Italian composer. Signor Verdi has left England."

Our comment upon this piece of prophetic egotism is that the master is to-day admired by the artistic universe, is unrivalled by any living master of music, and for a while, at least, will be unsurpassed, if ever closely approached, by a composer of his own country.

The Times's notice of *I Masnadieri* was more favourable. To find some glimmering of good, therefore, in a Verdi score of this period affords, certainly, relieving reading. Jenny Lind's singing is particularly noted, and strangely enough, airs, duets, *cabalette*, etc. (involving that melodic fancy and invention said to be so wholly wanting in Verdi), are expressly cited as "points" of the opera, to wit—"The duet with Gardoni in the third act was another piece of great effect, and the pleasing *cabaletta* '*Lassu resplendere*' earned the singers a call."[1]

Verdi rushed from England disgusted with the critics; but to be fair to that sagacious

[1] *The Times*, 23rd July 1847.

regiment, in this instance, their verdict was well found; for nowhere was *I Masnadieri* successful, not even when as *Les Brigands* it was produced in France in 1870. This took place at L'Athenée Theatre, when Mademoiselle Marimon filled the part of Amalie.

The failure of *I Masnadieri* did not lessen Mr. Lumley's unbounded faith in Verdi; and when Signor Costa threw down the *bâton* (this opera being the last he conducted at Her Majesty's) to assume the post of *chef d'orchestre* at the rival Covent Garden house, Mr. Lumley offered the young Italian *maestro* the vacancy. A tempting offer of a large salary, a three years' engagement, and the right to put a new opera of his own composition upon the stage each year was made. What tremendous art issues hung in the balance! A consent from Verdi, and his later works might never have been written, for the turmoil of a conductor's life knocks out of a man all energy for composition; besides which, when once the *bâton* is taken up, the creative faculty invariably disappears. Fortunately, the *maestro* could reply only in the negative, since he was pledged to write two new operas for Lucca the publisher, and a theatre engagement would prevent his

fulfilling this contract, the cancelling of which Lucca would not entertain.

The end of this business was that Verdi, on the *ne sutor ultra crepidam* principle, stuck to his last, and instead of turning conductor remained composer.[1]

In a short time there appeared *Il Corsaro* and *La Battaglia di Legnano*, which advanced their composer's reputation but little. *Il Corsaro* was first given at the Grand Theatre, Trieste, on the 25th October 1848. It had words by Piave, based upon Byron; and Lucca, the publisher, paid Verdi £800 for the score, but it was never a success. A somewhat better reception fell to *La Battaglia di Legnano*, produced at Rome in 1849, because it afforded the sensitive Italians a further political outlet. The libretto was patriotic in its drift, and Verdi, true to himself, had imparted to the music an ardent aggressive character, which had already won political friends.

Verdi's next opera, however, was to make amends for these scores. The management of the San Carlo Theatre at Naples, the

[1] It will be remembered that Michael William Balfe eventually took Signor Costa's place at Her Majesty's Theatre.

exchequer of which was not in a healthy state, had arranged with Verdi for a new opera, the price for which was to be £510. The libretto was by M. Cammerano, and has been adjudged as one of the best of opera books. It tells of Luisa Miller, the daughter of an old soldier, who has two lovers, the favoured one being Rudolpho, the son of Count Walter, the lord of the village, of whose rank, however, she and her father are ignorant until the latter is informed of it by Wurm, the Count's Castellan, Luisa's rejected suitor, who out of jealousy also informs the old Count Walter of his son's attachment. The Count, on hearing the news, is enraged, and insists upon his son marrying his cousin Federica, the widow of the Duke of Oldstheim, to secure which he imprisons the old soldier Miller, only releasing him upon Rudolpho's threatening to divulge a murder which his father has committed. In the second act Wurm is met urging Luisa to write a letter renouncing Rudolpho, the conditions upon which the Count will release her father, which letter is to prefer the choice of Wurm, and to be witnessed. The document is then taken to Rudolpho, who, maddened, challenges Wurm; while the Count, to accentuate matters,

pretends that he is now willing for his son to marry Luisa, but that, as she has betrayed him, he should show his revenge by marrying the Duchess. All advanced tenor singers will recall the fine recitative, "*Oh! fede negar potessi agli occhi miei!*" and aria, "*Quando le sere al placido*," in which Rudolpho's anguish is expressed at this crisis of the story. The third act introduces Luisa in the greatest despair, praying for death as a relief to her grief. Here Rudolpho appears, and learning from Luisa's own lips that she wrote the letter, puts poison into a cup, drinks it himself, and offers it to Luisa, who takes a draught. Knowing that her last hour is come, she reveals the plot, when Rudolpho's cries of despair are so intense that Miller, villagers, and Wurm rush to the scene. Suddenly Rudolpho stabs Wurm, and then lays himself down to die by the side of Luisa. The whole is a shocking story, but not more horrible and repulsive than the *Rigoletto*, *Traviata*, and *Trovatore* libretti.

Verdi finished the score, and leaving Paris, where the cholera had broken out, he reached Naples in time to find the San Carlo house in a state of bankruptcy. The production of, as well as the payment for, the opera was delayed;

but eventually, *Luisa Miller* came out on the 8th December 1849. Verdi was present at the first performance, and while standing on the stage surrounded with friends, had a somewhat ominous experience. A side scene suddenly fell, and would have crushed Verdi, but for his presence of mind in throwing himself back. A superstitious story attributes the accident, and the cold reception of the last act of the opera, compared with the boisterous triumph of the others, to the influence of an evil genius—*jettatore*—in the person of one Capecelatro, who, evading vigilance, had gained admission to the theatre and to the presence of the composer, just as he had succeeded in doing when *Alzira* was so coolly received.

It has to be observed that the Neapolitans are renowned for their superstition, and that Capecelatro was credited with possessing the evil eye.

Withal *Luisa Miller* was a success at Naples, if not later on in London and Paris. Madame Gazzaniga took the part, singing the music superbly, and on all sides it was agreed that the composition was one of Verdi's grandest efforts. Later opinions have somewhat confirmed this, while not a few con-

noisseurs have regarded *Luisa Miller* as the most coherent and consistent of the composer's works, excepting always his latest operas.

Luisa Miller was another of the operas which Mr. Lumley produced during his unfortunate reign at Her Majesty's Theatre. Here is the account of its introduction :—

"On Tuesday the 8th June (1858) was given for the first time on the Anglo-Italian boards, Verdi's opera of *Luisa Miller*, and both Mademoiselle Piccolomini and Madame Alboni were included in the "cast." Of this work some Italian critics had been accustomed to speak as the *chef d'œuvre* of this favourite composer. But the production of *Luisa Miller* did not greatly benefit the management. The 'Little Lady' (Piccolomini) displayed all her attractive qualities as an actress, and as an actress reaped her harvest of applause. But by general accord, on the part of Verdi-ites, the opera was declared to be the weakest of his many productions. It was considered to be wanting in melody, a charge seldom brought against Signor Verdi. There were no particular salient points to be looked forward to as the *grands bouquets* of Signor Verdi's musical fireworks, as is the

case in most of his other operas. The libretto, also, founded upon Schiller's early tragedy of *Kabale und Liebe*, a subject, it might be thought, highly favourable to lyrical working out, had lost so much of its true dramatic metal in passing through the crucible of the Italian *poeta*, that it had come out a mass of unattractive and unsightly ore. Passages of interest and passion could not be altogether wanting with a subject in which the dramatic instincts of the composer could not be utterly silent; but the true element, both musically and dramatically speaking, was evidently absent, at least to English minds. Signor Giuglini sang the one pleasing *romanza* to the delight of a crowded audience; and Alboni poured forth her mellifluous notes in an interpolated *cavatina;* but *Luisa Miller* failed to win the suffrages of the frequenters of Her Majesty's Theatre. It lingered, hoping for success 'against hope,' on the boards of Her Majesty's Theatre for a very few nights, and then fled them to return no more."[1]

An able critic, writing of this feature of the 1858 season, says:—

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera* (Lumley), p. 442.

"The only real novelty that Mr. Lumley ventured to mount and bring forward was Verdi's *Luisa Miller* . . . the result of which was unequivocal failure, for dull and mawkish as is the work itself, Mademoiselle Piccolomini had not the slightest pretension to have been thrust into the leading character, and Madame Alboni made nothing of the small part of the Duchess Fredrica, although she evidently tried to do so, by substituting a *cavatina* for the original duet of the opera. Giuglini alone was appreciated, the music being somewhat suited to his style; but he began to manifest the bad taste of relying upon long breaths, loud A's, and other meretricious devices, instead of singing legitimately and sensibly. Beneventano, Vialetti, and Castelli, who undertook the other parts, trenched so closely upon the grotesque, that they produced amusement rather than pleasure. In spite of its being said that *Luisa Miller* had thoroughly succeeded, its immediate withdrawal from the bills positively enough proved the contrary."[1]

Luisa Miller found no favour in the eyes of the *Athenæum* critic.

[1] *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. ii. p. 320.

"There is little from first to last in the music to reconcile us to the composer. . . . As regards the solo music, *Luisa Miller* contains nothing so good. . . . The heroine might be Gilda, Violetta, or Abigaille for any touch that marks her life or her country. . . . The want of local colour, however, might be overlooked (in consideration of the master's school and country), were there any compensating beauty of melody. Everything that is not trite in the score is unpleasant. . . . The songs are in the known Verdi patterns, full of fever, empty of feeling. . . . The music of *I Due Foscari* was meagre and dismal enough, but the music of *Luisa Miller*, so far as idea is concerned, seems yet more meagre and dismal."[1]

In these and similar terms did Mr. Chorley dismiss *Luisa Miller*. Nor was *The Times* criticism more hopeful, since that summed up the opera "as an uninterrupted series of commonplaces, pale, monotonous, and dreary, which may fairly be symbolised as the sweepings of our composer's study or the rinsings of his wine-bottles. . . . The music of *Luisa Miller* is not worth the consideration

[1] *Athenæum*, 12th June 1858.

to which an ambitious failure might be entitled."[1]

If Verdi studied his press notices at all attentively—Press Cutting Agencies were not institutions of those days—he could have been under no apprehension as to what two at least of the English journals thought of his endeavours. Yet, here was the opera containing among other beautiful music that really fine piece of declamatory song-writing, the recitative and romanza "*Quando le sere al placido.*" Any one fortunate enough to have heard the late Gardoni sing this beautiful song—neighbours in Duke Street, Portland Place, where Gardoni several years back lodged in the same house with Pinsuti, often heard it—would assuredly apply to it some better epithet than "wine-bottle rinsings" or "sweepings." Thousands of pounds in royalties are to-day being paid on maudlin, semi-religious, and other songs which, for sterling musical worth and merit, are no more to be compared with this one song by Verdi than a rush-light is to be likened to the illumining power of the glorious mid-day orb.

Not even in his *Recollections* was Mr.

[1] *The Times*, 14th June 1858.

Chorley able to forget his *bête noir*. Speaking of the 1858 season, he says: "Also there was presented a third work, new to our Italian stage, Signor Verdi's *Luisa Miller*. . . . It has seemed to me that, as one among Signor Verdi's operas, *Luisa Miller*, taken on its own terms, of fire, faggot, and rack, is the weakest of the weak. There are *staccato* screams in it enough to content any lover of shocking excitement; but the entire texture of the music implies (I can but fancy) either a feeble mistake, or else a want of power on the part of an artificer who, obviously (as Signor Verdi does) demanding situation and passion and agony to kindle the fire under his cauldron, has, also, only one alphabet, one grammar, one dictionary, whatsoever the scene, whatsoever the country—one *cantabile*, one spasmodic *bravura*, one feverish *crescendo*, as the average tools, by pressure of which the stress on the public is to be strained out."[1]

Feeble criticism, indeed, so far as the genius of penetration is concerned, but powerful enough in all conscience in its egotism and exuberance of etymology.

It was given on the 7th December 1852

[1] Chorley's *Musical Recollections*, vol. ii. p. 297.

at the Théâtre Italien in Paris, when Mademoiselle Sophie Cruvelli (La Baronne Vigier) took the title *rôle*, but neither Cruvelli, nor, a few weeks later, the admirable Bosio, could give wings to the work. As recently as 1874 Madame Adelina Patti achieved a genuine success with the part, albeit she was badly supported by her colleagues in the cast. During the London Italian Opera season of that year, Madame Patti, much to her credit, added this work to her already extensive *répertoire*.

Two operas—one *Stiffelio*, produced unsuccessfully at Trieste on the 16th November 1850, the other, *Il Finto Stanislas*, belonging to the same year—require mentioning only, before we pass to the period of those successful operas which brought Verdi universal fame.

CHAPTER VI

RIGOLETTO TO *AÏDA*—SECOND PERIOD OPERAS

Turning-point in Verdi's career—The libretto of *Rigoletto*—Production of *Rigoletto* in Venice, London, and Paris—Great success of the opera—*Athenæum* and *The Times* on *Rigoletto*—"*La Donna e mobile*"—A Second period style—*Il Trovatore* written for Rome—The libretto—Its reception at the Apollo Theatre—The work produced at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Carden—Its cast and Graziani's singing therein—Lightning study of the *Azucena rôle*—*Athenæum* and *The Times* on *Il Trovatore*—*La Traviata*—The libretto and argument—The first performance at Venice a *fiasco*—Judgment reversed—Brilliant success of the opera in London—Piccolomini's impersonation of Violetta—Mr. Lumley's testimony—The Press and *La Traviata*—*Athenæum* and *The Times* criticism of *La Traviata*—*Les Vêpres Siciliennes*—*Prima donna* runs away—Reception of the opera in Paris and London—Verdi in Germany—*The Times* criticism—*Simon Boccanegra* a failure—*Un Ballo in Maschera*—Trouble with the authorities—Production and success of *Un Ballo in Maschera*—Its reception in London—*The Times* on the opera—*La Forza del Destino* unsuccessful.

We here reach a period in the composer's career where unmistakable signs of a change in Verdi's musical manner present themselves. Verdi was a born musician. So too, were

Bellini and Donizetti, but Verdi, by industry and study, has done immeasurably more for Italy's art than these or any other of her sons. A musical progressivist, he has ever been on the art march. Not content with writing opera after opera of the normal Bellini stamp, we find him at this stage improving upon his model, and engaging in the construction of a series of opera compositions which, analysts declare, constitute a Second period in Verdi's artistic development. The first of these works was *Rigoletto.*

Verdi had entered into an agreement with *impresario* Lasina to write another opera for the Fenice Theatre, and Piave had prepared a libretto based upon Victor Hugo's drama, *Le Roi s'amuse.* Everybody knows the tragedy, and that it was suppressed lest the cap should fit, because the principal part of *François Premier* showed a depraved libertine, whose capers were not unreflected in Royalty. The libretto provoked the Austrian supervision, and brought in the police. The original title of the book was *La Maledizione*, but this was dropped. It closely follows the French play, the locality and the personages only being changed. There is the deformed jester

or fool of the Court, who is prostrated by a malediction from a father whom he has mocked, and who is punished for his witticism by Gilda, his daughter, being made the victim of his Sovereign. This unfortunate girl is then seen giving up her own life to save that of her betrayer, the Duke having been entrapped into a lone house to be assassinated by the jester's orders.

Eventually, all points being arranged, Verdi set to work upon *Rigoletto, Buffone di Corte*, which was produced with signal success on the 11th March 1851. That world-famed melody "*La Donna e mobile*" made an instantaneous hit, and has been hummed and sung to death in every quarter of the globe ever since. To make quite sure that the public should not get wind of this tune before the night of the performance, Verdi did not put it upon paper until within a few hours of the time when Mirate, the tenor, had to sing it.

As soon as it could be arranged, the opera was introduced at London and Paris, being brought forward at the Italian Opera, Covent Garden, for the 1853 season, and at the Théâtre Italien in the French capital on the 19th January 1857. *Rigoletto* was a

brilliant success in London; indeed, of three operatic novelties which Mr. Gye produced in that season, it was the only one that proved attractive or profitable. On this occasion the cast was:—*Gilda*, Madame Bosio; *Duke of Mantua*, Signor Mario; *Rigoletto*, Signor Ronconi; *Sparafucile*, Signor Tagliafico; while subordinate characters were represented by Mlle. Didiée (Magdalen), Madame Temple, Signor Polonini, and others. Mario's singing was splendid, and the acting of Ronconi was greatly admired. "Great as was the histrionic genius of Ronconi admitted to be, his Rigoletto has combined displays of comedy and tragedy that can only recall the well-known picture of Garrick between Thalia and Melpomene. Let us instance the scene in the Ducal palace in the second act" (wrote an eye-witness) "in which Rigoletto strives to smile with the courtiers, whilst his heart is breaking at the abduction of his child—an abduction in which he himself has been made, innocently, to assist. The expression of Ronconi's face in this scene, one-half of the face a court jester, the other half that of the bereaved father, can never be forgotten."[1]

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 21st May 1853.

In Paris a French translation of *Rigoletto* was equally well received.

The musical characteristics of *Rigoletto* were immediately discerned and discussed. The general drift of the criticism was that in *Rigoletto* melody was wanting, that there were no fine concerted pieces, and that the opera possessed everything save living properties. The truth was, Verdi was expressing himself in something of a new language that had yet to be learned.

Here is what an impartial critic thought of *Rigoletto* at the time of its production :—

"We have never been the champions nor the detractors of Verdi, and we recognise in *Rigoletto* a higher order of beauty than struck us even in *Ernani* and the *Due Foscari*, and an abandonment, at the same time, of his most palpable defects. *Rigoletto* cannot be ranked, however, as a masterpiece ; it is full of plagiarisms and faults, and yet abounds with the most captivating music."[1]

The following is what the *Athenæum* had to say of *Rigoletto*, a work which, by the bye, was performed at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden, as recently as last season, when

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 21st May 1853.

it was received with well-nigh unbounded applause and real pleasure:—"Such effect as *Rigoletto* produces is produced not by its dramatic propriety of sound to sense. There is hardly one phrase in the part of the Buffoon which might not belong to Signor Verdi's Doge in *I Due Foscari* or to his *Nabucco*. The music of combination and dramatic action, again, is puerile and queer—odd modulations being perpetually wrenched out with the vain hope of disguising the intrinsic meagreness of the ideas, and flutes being used for violins, or *vice versâ*, apparently not to charm the listener but to make him stare. Thus, the opening ball scene, accompanied throughout by orchestras on the stage, the abduction *finale*, the scene between Rigoletto and the courtiers, and the storm in the last act, are alike miserable in their meagre patchiness and want of meaning. . . . Signor Verdi is less violent in his instrumentation in *Rigoletto* than he was in his earlier operas; but he has not here arrived at the music of intellect and expression, which is French or German, as distinguished from the music of melody, which is Italian. . . . The air of display for Gilda in the garden scene, called in the published copies of the

music a *Polacca*, though in common tempo, is as ineffective a mixture of commonplace and eccentricity as it ever fell to the lot of a *prima donna* to deliver."[1]

The Times spoke thus of *Rigoletto* :—"The imitations and plagiarisms from other composers are frequent, while there is not a single elaborate and well-conducted *finale*, or even *morceau l'ensemble*. In aiming at simplicity, Signor Verdi has hit frivolity. In other operas he has often, with a certain degree of success hidden poverty of idea under a pompous display of instruments; but in the present, abandoning that artifice, and relying upon the strength of his melodic invention, he has triumphantly demonstrated that he has very few ideas that can be pronounced original. In short, with one exception (*Luisa Miller*), *Rigoletto* is the most feeble opera of Signor Verdi with which we have the advantage to be acquainted, the most uninspired, the barest, and the most destitute of ingenious contrivance. To enter into an analysis would be a loss of time and space."[2]

And yet, after forty years or more of musi-

[1] *Athenæum*, 21st May 1853.
[2] *The Times*, 16th May 1853.

cal progress, a crowded fashionable house, to say nothing of the wisdom of the management, will assemble to give its time, attention, and money to listen to an opera which, if we are to believe these two sapient leading critics of a past age, was scarcely worth the paper upon which it was written! Both old and new journalism to-day appears to have everything to say in favour of *Rigoletto!* Instead of the opera dying, it has proved, we repeat, one of the most admired of Verdi's early works, and we who are living the years of this closing nineteenth century can see what a fitting connecting link *Rigoletto* forms between Verdi's First and Third period works. The composer bridges us quietly over from impulsive musical youth to a ripe artistic fulness which, natural as it all seems to us who can look back upon Verdi's gradual development towards perfection of style, must have bewildered his closely scrutinising contemporaries. No previous work of his had shown similar masterly force and originality. Apart from the evergreen "*La Donna e mobile*" air, such attractive numbers as the soprano romance, and the soprano, tenor, and bass duos in the second act, are beauties of

the opera that will always tend to keep it on the stage; while no praise would be too much to bestow upon the quartuor in the last act, a piece of concerted music which competent judges are agreed would of itself be sufficient to stamp Verdi as a composer of rare fancy and imagination.

Since its style and merit were maintained in several works that followed it, this opera well lends itself as the starting-point of a Second era in Verdi's career as a leading composer for the Italian lyric stage.

Rigoletto was the first of a series of fine examples of dramatic art, which brought world-wide fame and ample profit to Verdi, lifting him, at the same time, into the first rank of operatic composers. In the face of its alleged defects—absence of melody and concerted pieces, together with a subdued, restricted orchestration—the audiences accepted it, the general feeling being that it stood unsurpassed by any Italian opera. Every *habitué* of the opera-house to-day is familiar with the sparkling beauties of *Rigoletto*, and fittingly enough, the opera finds a place in almost every season's programme. The strongest proof of its merits, however, is the

fact that performances of the work, extending over a period of forty years, have neither diminished its attractiveness nor prejudiced a new and rising generation against either the book or the music. Several of Verdi's early operas have weathered the test of time and fashion bravely, especially if we remember the evanescent nature of opera generally ; but not one, not the *Trovatore* among his early works, is more highly regarded by musical people to-day than is *Rigoletto, the Court Jester.*

With the composer's next opera we meet Verdi the melodic universalist.

It was at the Apollo Theatre in Rome that the *Trovatore* first saw the light on the 19th January 1853. Cammarano the Italian poet found subject in *El Trovador*, a brilliant drama by Guttierez, a talented Spanish author of only nineteen summers. The story, a revoltingly horrible one, is well known. A gipsy woman put to death by a nobleman on a charge of witchcraft, has a daughter to whom she bequeaths the task of avenging her death. The daughter steals the Count's younger child, and brings him up as her own, instilling into his mind a

hatred of his own brother, whom he knows not to be such. The brothers become rivals in love; the reputed son of the gipsy (who has risen to distinction) being preferred by the object of their passion. The quarrel becomes deadly; the younger brother falls into the hands of the elder, who orders his execution. The gipsy witnesses the death of her supposed son; and when the axe has fallen, turns exultingly to the Count exclaiming, "My mother is avenged; you have murdered your own brother!" The lady who is beloved by the rival brothers, unable to save her lover's life, swallows poison. The epoch is the fifteenth century.

Undaunted by frailties of his *collaborateur*, the *maestro* went to work, and in a short time *Il Trovatore* was clothed in musical garb. What that harmonious garment proved the world well knows—too well, say some who, like the late Mr. Babbage, mathematician and calculator, have been almost driven to death by organ-grinders. Whatever was confused and improbable in the book was amply atoned for by the music, for Verdi set it to some of his most passionate-human melody and harmony.

The first representation was awaited with feverish excitement, akin to the musical sensibilities of the Italian people. The day proved wet and cold, but not sufficiently so to damp the ardour of the enthusiastic Romans. At early morn the theatre doors were besieged, and as the hour of the performance drew near the pitch of fervour was intense. Eventually the crowd got into the theatre, packing it from floor to ceiling with marvellous rapidity and dangerous discomfort. Then amid alternate periods of strained attention and agitation, the opera was performed. Each scene and situation brought down thunders of applause until the very walls echoed with the shoutings. Outside, the people took up the cry, and there arose such shouts of "Long live Verdi!" "Verdi and Italy!" "Italy's greatest composer!" "Viva Verdi!" as could be heard again inside the theatre.

The artists at this memorable performance were Signore Penco (Leonora) and Goggi; and Signori Grossi (Manrico), Baucarde, Guicciardi, and Balderi.

The spread of the *Trovatore* music was electrical. Theatre after theatre produced

the work, so eagerly did subscribers and patrons clamour. At Naples three houses were giving the opera at about the same time.

It was at this time that Verdi was meeting with a determined opposition from a brother craftsman from whom better treatment might reasonably have been expected. "In Naples," states an eye-witness, "Mercadante reigned supreme. He would not listen to the sound of Verdi's name. He declared even *Rigoletto* was bosh,—you know I was then singing *Gilda* at the Teatro Nuova;—he had the Court and the highest society for his patrons, and managed to set everybody against poor Verdi. Things went so far that he organised a cabal against him at Court, and when *Trovatore*—which by the way, after Rome, the people would have—was brought out at San Carlo, Mercadante had so ingratiated himself with the censor Lord Chamberlain, and I don't know who else, that they only allowed two acts of *Trovatore* to be sung, and there was a perfect revolution in the town until the third and fourth acts were accorded by the management. I was the first one to sing the full score at little TeatroNuovo. The subscribers

who were three nights at San Carlo were the other three nights at my theatre; and to my dying day I shall never forget the success it had! Happily Teatro Nuova was the first in the field with the complete opera. . . . It is impossible to conceive the tricks and cabals against Verdi put up by old Mercadante. One would have thought that as he was old and nearing his grave, and as his last opera at San Carlo had been a failure, he would have had some consideration for the young and struggling artist; but, on the contrary, he kept Verdi out of Naples as long as he could. The people finally wouldn't stand it any longer; they weren't going to put up even with Mercadante at his best when there was a fresh new composer taking Italy by storm—when every Italian capital was singing his operas, and Naples, according to all, the very seat of fine arts, the only city deprived of hearing Verdi and acclaiming his works."[1]

Not only in Italy did the *Trovatore* "take." It went the round of the European capitals in an unprecedentedly short time, and nowhere was it admired more than in that stronghold

[1] *Verdi: Milan and "Othello"* (Roosevelt), p. 49.

of contrapuntal prejudice, Germany, where its alluring melodies proved simply irresistible.

In 1854 it was given at the Paris Théâtre Italien, and the following year saw its production in London. The management of the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden, brought it forward on Thursday, 11th May, when it was received with warm applause, which increased with every representation. On this occasion the principal parts were filled by Madame Viardot[1] (Azucena), Mdlle. Jenny

[1] *Apropos* of this distinguished cantatrice, sister to the immortal Malibran, an interesting narrative is related in connection with the first production of *Il Trovatore* in Paris, where, by the way, it soon had no less than one hundred representations. Verdi himself has told the tale. "The morning arriving for the first performance, Madame Alboni announced that she was ill, and the opera could not be given that night. What was to be done? Every one was waiting; every seat was sold. I was in despair. Happily, I thought of Madame Viardot. I said to myself, 'She is the only woman in the world who, at a moment's notice, can take the part, if she will only consent to do it.'

"I tore off to her house. It was early in the morning. 'Mon cher,' she said, 'what on earth has brought you at this hour?'

"I hastily told her the cause. 'Alboni is ill.'

"'But what can I do?' she said.

"'You must sing it,' I cried.

"She interrupted, 'I have been so busy, I haven't even seen the music; I haven't looked at it.'

"'There it is,' I said, producing a roll. 'It is very easy; it will be nothing to you.' So, laughing and chatting, and protesting that she couldn't, I sat down to the piano. We ran

Ney (Leonora), Signor Tamberlik (Manrico) and Signor Graziani (Conte di Luna), who did full justice to Verdi's captivating music.

Referring to this remarkable performance, an experienced writer says :—

"The favourable impression Graziani had made in the *Ernani* induced the management to put him forward in another of Verdi's operas, *Il Trovatore*, a work which has brought more money into theatrical treasuries than any other production of modern times. If Graziani had sung nothing else in this opera than the air '*Il balen del suo sorriso*,' as the Conte di Luna, he would have permanently established himself; yet whoever witnessed the clumsy manner in which he 'loafed' down to the footlights as the symphony of this air was being played—as he still does—could by no means have anticipated anything else than a manifestation of the most positive vulgarity, instead of hearing the beautiful voice and

the music of Azucena over from beginning to end two or three times. In the afternoon we had another rehearsal, and that evening she sang the part with overwhelming success.

"'That is what we call a quick study,' said Verdi, laughing, 'to learn such a *rôle* in the space of eight hours, dress it, and go on the stage and sing it; but then, you must remember there is only one Pauline Viardot in all this world'" (*Verdi: Milan and "Othello"* (Roosevelt), p. 49).

suave *cantabile* with which he invested that somewhat commonplace, yet not the less popular, invention. Mdlle. Ney was the Leonora on this occasion, and was singing and acting with care, according to the habit of German stage usage, but nothing more. The event of the evening, however, was Madame Viardot's Azucena, the part she had 'created' in Paris, and one of the most remarkable performances of its time. The savage, credulous, restless Spanish gipsy, strong in her instincts, but whose reason amounts to little beyond a few broken ideas of revenge, was manifested in every word, look, and gesture. Since Pasta and Rubini left the stage, nothing of nicer vocal finish, and nothing in dramatic utterance more true and beautiful than her delivery of the *andantino*, '*Si la stanchezza*,' had ever been listened to. The Royal Italian Opera had never, indeed, heard such singing as hers in such music, which lay thoroughly within her compass, the middle portion of which had gained both body and sweetness. Tamberlik undertook the part of the Trovatore, and gained ground with his audience as the opera proceeded; but his magnificent voice gave un-

welcome evidence of wear and tear in its diminished resonance, when he desired to use it to advantage in the most exacting passages."[1]

It will be allowed, we suspect, that no dramatic-lyric work is so well known, or has enjoyed a more amazing popularity than has Verdi's opera of *The Troubadour*. Whatever may be its merits and demerits, it is unquestionably a work which has delighted a generation fast passing away; while it bids fair to afford equal pleasure to a new and rising one, judging by the hearty reception given to the opera at recent performances. For long and long have ominous words been uttered predicting the decline and death of *Il Trovatore*, with all Italian opera of its kin. But behold it is alive and well! Thanks to the efforts of "apostles" of music like Hullah and others, musical education has gone on apace since *Il Trovatore* first appeared here; but with all this, and all the classicism which it has been fashionable to ape in music, there yet remains something in Verdi's opera that still attracts, not merely the "mob," but educated people. This suggests merit of some kind. What said critics forty years ago:—

[1] *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. ii. p. 280.

"By the choice of his subjects," says the *Athenæum*, "we sometimes can gauge a composer, as well as by his melodies. Bellini may have known even less of the scientific processes of composition than Signor Verdi (whom report declares to be a thoughtful, cultivated gentleman, as anxious according to his measure of light for dramatic reality in opera as Herr Wagner himself), nevertheless Bellini contrived to appropriate two of the best Italian books ever written, those of *Norma* and *La Sonnambula*. . . . But in *Il Trovatore*, as throughout every opera by the master with which we are acquainted, these gleams of purpose and intelligence are relieved and contrasted against a general ground of commonplace, than which little more monotonous in its mannerism can be conceived. The dash which may be found in the *cabaletta* '*Ditale amor*' with its *staccati* and its sighs and sobbings, and its snatch at high notes by way of brilliancy, is as old as *Ernani*. The *cantabile* for the tenor, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and with a plurality of flats for key, has been written for tenor and baritone one hundred times, if once, by Donizetti. The movement of the *stretto* to '*Cruda Sorte*' in

Signor Rossini's *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, the employment of principal voices in unison, whether it be placed or misplaced, are anew resorted to here, with a coolness nothing short of curious, in one who believes that he has a mission and professes to write a 'system.'"[1]

The Times notice of *Il Trovatore* was more appreciative than usual. There was a desire to find something good in the musician, and although the criticism hardly conveys the idea that the work referred to would ever attain the extraordinary popularity which it has done, a popularity extending to this hour, yet it must, in justice, be noted that certain favourable points in the work did appeal to, and were duly chronicled by the critic. Not that we can admit that the notice was one to induce the composer to feel at ease. A spirit of antagonism to Italian art still reigns, and throughout it seems to ring out the old familiar theme, that no good thing could come out of Italy. Nor could it have greatly served Verdi's art-progress.

"*Il Trovatore*," to quote a few of its strains, "though it exhibits Signor Verdi in his best

[1] *Athenæum*, 12th May 1855.

holiday attire, is hardly destined to raise him in the estimation of real judges. . . . The kind, and degree of merit, the direct influence of his music, and its chance of outliving an ephemeral reputation are questions apart. . . . He is neither a Rossini, nor an Auber, nor a Meyerbeer; far from it; but he is not, as some would insist, a nonentity, almost as far indeed from that as from the other. . . . The weaker part of the first act" (we are told) "is the trio, where the Count (Signor Graziani) surprises the troubadour in the presence of Leonora, which is rambling and incoherent, and after all but an apology for a trio, since the tenor and soprano are in unison almost throughout. The last movement is vulgar and commonplace, ill-written for the voices, and extremely noisy."[1]

This is what the *Illustrated London News* thought of *Il Trovatore*:—

"The production of *Il Trovatore* at the Royal Italian Opera has been attended with complete success. . . . On its first performance (on Thursday) it was received with warm applause, and on the Saturday and Tuesday

[1] *The Times*, 14th May 1855.

following its reception was more and more enthusiastic. It is evident that the *Trovatore* will be a permanent addition to the *répertoire* of the theatre. We expected this. Verdi's latest opera had not only been received with acclamations in his own country; it had achieved triumphs in the principal theatres of Germany; and, last of all, in Paris; and it was not likely that London would reverse the judgment pronounced by the most authoritative tribunals of the Continent. Verdi has long been popular as a dramatic composer; and his popularity has been literal—gained by the voice of the multitude in opposition to that of criticism. While writers learned in musical lore have been labouring to prove that Verdi is a shallow pretender, his operas have been giving delight to thousands in every part of Europe."[1]

Wherever performed, in Italy, France, Germany, Russia, or England, the tale has always been the same respecting the *Trovatore*. It has been truly enjoyed by the public who have flocked to hear it; and those pieces which are favourites now were favourites from the first. It did not pretend to be a

[1] 19th May 1855.

classic, but times and oft it has done the trick for managers in filling their coffers; and after all, any legitimate work which accomplishes this for many years together must not be lightly regarded. Even to-day, forty years and more after its first production, *Il Trovatore* when well presented never fails to make a deep impression upon audiences. In the 1895 season it was given (May 18) at the Covent Garden Opera with Signor Tamagno in the title-role, when the entire opera was listened to with breathless attention. The enthusiasm was unbounded, and the favourite old work roused as much excitement as if it had been a brand new opera.

La Traviata, a name familiar almost as the *Trovatore*, was the title of the composer's next opera. The *maestro* had witnessed younger Dumas' *La Dame aux Camelias*, that none too delicate play, which, in its day, startled even the Parisians, and he suggested the work to Piave the librettist as an opera book. *The Traviata* was to satisfy an engagement with the direction of the Fenice Theatre, and by working double tides, *i.e.* during the while he was composing *Il Trovatore*, Verdi had the score ready for production on the 6th

March 1855, some ten weeks after the *Trovatore* "first night."

Opera-goers are familiar with the pathetic story and the sorrows of the erring, interesting heroine. La Traviata, *i.e.* the outcast or lost one, is a youthful beauty and reigning favourite, who gives a splendid entertainment at her house. Among the gay company is a young gentleman, Alfredo by name, who really loves her, and who inspires her with a similar attachment. Actuated by a pure and mutual passion, they retire to the country, where they live together in happy seclusion. One day, in Alfredo's absence, Violetta receives a visit from a venerable old gentleman, who announces himself as the father of her lover. He represents to her the ruinous consequences of his son's present course of life, and urges her to save him, by consenting to leave him. Resolving to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of his welfare, she departs on the instant for Paris, leaving him in the belief that she is faithless, and has forsaken him for another. She returns to her former life, and afterwards meets her lost lover at a party given by one of her friends. Alfredo is furious at the sight of her, insults her grossly, challenges the man

whom he considers his successful rival, and the poor girl is carried fainting from the apartment. Her heart is now broken, and nothing remains for her but to die. In the last scene, she is in her bedchamber, extremely weak, but sustained by hope, for her lover's father moved by her sufferings has written to say that he will bring his son to her. They arrive. The lover flies to her and for a moment there is rapture; but the shock is fatal. The dying flame goes out, and she dies of joy in his arms.

The success of *Il Trovatore* had brought Verdi immense popularity throughout Europe. Great things therefore were expected at this performance of *La Traviata*. Signora Donatelli was the Violetta, Signori Graziani and Varesi filling the parts of the lover and the father respectively. The work was a failure!

"*La Traviata* last night was a *fiasco*. Am I to blame, or the singers? Time will prove," wrote Verdi to friend Muzio. The *fiasco* might have been avoided had all the contributing circumstances been as evident as the astonishing disparity that existed between the imaginary Violetta and the lady filling that *rôle*, who to a commanding stature added a

splendid physique with *embonpoint*, weighing some twelve stone, which made it madness to imagine that the ravages of a galloping consumption had left her but a few short hours to live! Of course, the house burst into a roar, and went off into an uncontrollable fit of laughter that drove everybody off the stage.

Verdi was distracted, but felt confident that this judgment could be reversed. He made alterations, substituted Louis XIII. costumes for "swallow-tail and white choker" dress, and with a new cast, including a Violetta that could be encompassed, the work was given at the San Beneditto Theatre. The *éclat* was immense, *La Traviata* that had been hissed and hooted was acclaimed to the skies. Speedily it spread over Italy, and in the following year was brought to London. The irresistibly affecting story—one which the sternest moralist could barely listen to unmoved—was chosen by Mlle. Piccolomini for her London *début* in the 1856 season. To quote Mr. Lumley's own words:—

"Mlle. Piccolomini, a young Italian lady of high lineage, made her curtsey on the boards of Her Majesty's Theatre on Saturday the 24th May in Verdi's opera *La Traviata*,

since become so famous and (it may be said at once, in spite of all that may be stated hereafter) so great a favourite, but produced for the first time on that occasion on the Anglo-Italian boards. The enthusiasm she created was immense. It spread like wildfire. Once more frantic crowds struggled in the lobbies of the theatre, once more dresses were torn and hats crushed in the conflict, once more a mania possessed the public. Marietta Piccolomini became the 'rage.' From the moment of her *début* the fortunes of the theatre were secured for the season."[1] "Opera and singer both were new," continues Mr. Lumley. "Curiosity and interest were excited both for the one and the other. There was an overflowing house. As through the coming season, so through her first night was the charming young lady's success unquestionable. After a warm reception, such as English audiences are wont to give by way of welcome to a meritorious stranger, Mlle. Piccolomini was to be heard and judged, and (what, as it turned out, was more to the purpose), she was to be seen. Applause followed her opening efforts. The charm of

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera* (Lumley), p. 375.

manner had begun to work. The second act produced at its conclusion a burst of genuine enthusiasm. At the end of the opera it was a frenzy. The whole house rose to congratulate the singer when recalled. The charm was complete. The vivacity of acting (especially in the death-scene of the *finale*) had worked their spell. Marietta Piccolomini was adopted at once as the pet (and afterwards how much petted!) child of Her Majesty's Theatre.

"Verdi's music now shared the same fate as its fortunate exponent. It pleased, it was run after, it became one of the most popular compositions of the time. It is true that musical 'purists' cavilled and criticised severely; that anti-Verdists denounced it with all the epithets of their stereotyped vocabulary as 'trashy, flimsy, and meretricious'; but, in spite of opposition and of bigotry, it not only attracted (perhaps even more than any other of Verdi's operas) countless crowds when the favourite 'charming little Piccolomini' was its exponent, but achieved a marked and lasting popularity at other theatres, as well as in every music hall throughout the land. Notwithstanding the accusation that the

'*Traviata* was weak and commonplace,' the 'catching' melody and, above all, the dramatic force and expression of a composer whose principal merit consisted in the peculiarity that he really was dramatic, gained upon the masses. It attained considerable popularity, moreover, in spite of a dangerous and equivocal subject; one which was denounced from the pulpit, denounced by mighty authority in the press, denounced even at one time by popular sentiment itself."[1]

Quite a contrast to the state of things when the work was howled at by the merry Venetians!

On the night of its first performance in this country, the *caste* included, besides Mlle. Piccolomini, Signori Calzolari and Beneventano, who filled the parts of the lover and father respectively.

A critic, one by no means usually ill-disposed towards Verdi, wrote of the performance as follows:—

"A new production from the prolific pen of *Maestro* Verdi is a thing to which we are pretty well accustomed, and it happens that the new production in question, *La Traviata*,

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera* (Lumley), p. 377.

is the weakest, as it is the last, of his numerous progeny. It has pretty tunes, for every Italian has more or less the gift of melody; but even the tunes are trite and common, bespeaking an exhausted invention, while there are no vestiges of the constructed skill, none of the masterly pieces of concerted music, which we find in the *Trovatore* or in *Rigoletto*."[1]

A section of the English press made a dead set against the opera, but the test of time has given the lie to detractors. Despite the heroine's damaged reputation, the music has proved sufficiently good, lasting, and attractive to keep the opera on the English boards, not to mention Continental theatres, for full forty years. The "highly immoral" story did not prove destructive to England's youth and age. The British character survived it!

When *La Traviata* was ready to be played before the British public, there was a great outburst of moral indignation. Mr. Lumley gives his version of the affair: "Permission was in vain demanded of the Lord Chamberlain to allow adaptations of the drama to appear upon the English stage. That this prohibition should have been enforced on a

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 31st May 1856.

stage where *George Barnwell*, and more especially *Jane Shore* (the heroine of which old tragedy is also a sympathetic Traviata, who dies a miserable death), are upheld as 'fine old legitimate' plays, and were once produced on the chief assemblage of the youth of the age at Christmastide, did not appear very consistent or even logical; and the *Traviata* appeared. And a considerable surprise (in spite of all previous minor 'grumblings') fell upon the public when it found its favourite opera morally crushed to the earth by the mighty thunder of the press. The 'foul and hideous horrors' of the *Traviata* were held up as proper objects for 'deep and unmitigated censure' in the leading journal. One clap of thunder followed on the other. In a long letter I published an elaborate defence of my opera against the accusation of its blatant 'immorality.' This letter appeared duly in the columns of *The Times*, as an appendix to a still more crushing denunciation. Minor journals flashed their own smaller lightnings in sympathetic response to this storm from the 'Thunderer.' But the public was not to be lectured out of its treat. It would not consider its morality endangered.

It still flocked to Verdi's opera, and the fascinating Piccolomini."[1]

The Times easily disposed of Verdi's share in the work. "The book," the criticism runs, "is of far more consequence than the music, which, except so far as it affords a vehicle for the utterance of the dialogue, is of no value whatever, and, moreover, because it is essentially as a dramatic vocalist that the brilliant success of Mlle. Piccolomini was achieved. . . . For the present, it will be sufficient to treat *La Traviata* as a play set to music. To Dumas fils, who invented the situations, and Mlle. Piccolomini, who delineated the emotions of the principal character, belong the honours of a triumph with which the composer has as little to do as possible."[2]

The *Athenæum* lost no time in "going for" Verdi over *La Traviata*. The first process was an examination of the "arranged score of Signor Verdi's setting of the *Dame aux Camelias*," whereupon the critic was in a position to say: "It seems written in the composer's later manner, grouping with his *Rigoletto* and *Trovatore*, without being equal to the latter

[1] *Reminiscences of the Opera* (Lumley), p. 379.
[2] *The Times*, 26th May 1856.

opera; to demand from its heroine a less extensive soprano voice than Signor Verdi usually demands; to contain in the *finale* to its second act a good specimen of those pompous slow movements in which the newer Italian *maestro* has wrought out a pattern indicated by Donizetti; also throughout an unusual proportion of music in triple, or waltz *tempo*. . . . The masquerade music is *fade* and trivial. . . . There is some of Signor Verdi's effective instrumentation in the opening of the final *terzetto*. All these good points summed up, the new opera, as a whole, is poor and pale—consumptive music, which can only be relished in the absence of some healthier novelty."[1]

Subsequently, when the Lord Chamberlain of the period came down upon *La Traviata* on account of its questionable story, we read: "Neither Signor Verdi's music (which is Signor Verdi's poorest) nor Mlle. Piccolomini's singing (which every one concedes is on a very small scale) have made the fame and the *furore* of the opera, and the lady. . . . The music of *La Traviata* is trashy; the young Italian lady cannot do justice to the music, such as it is. Hence it follows that the opera

[1] *Athenæum*, 3rd May 1856.

and the lady can only establish themselves in proportion as Londoners rejoice in a prurient story prettily acted . . . granted that *La Traviata* at her Majesty's Theatre has been the poorest music, poorly sung, which has been allowed to pass for the sake of its 'dear improper story,'" etc.[1]

Whatever the story, whatever the music of *La Traviata* it still lives as an opera, and is among the best of its class. This is due again, we believe, to the quality of the music, not to the nature of the story, for surely Londoners did not, forty years back,—nor would they now—betake themselves with their wives and daughters to the theatre to enjoy a lustful, itching story. The *Traviata* contains much of that warm, emotional, melodic profuseness which the public likes, and which it demands, when it throws off its working garb to take a little pleasure, sadly as, we are told, it takes this. The popular nature of the music, its freedom from technical and theatrical perplexity, which the public at large is glad to be without, its ever-changing colour, variety and expression—all this contributes to the vitality of *La Traviata*. Has it been, too,

[1] *Athenæum*, 16th August 1856.

the sensuous nature of the story which has led so many nervous *débutantes*, highly attuned in temperament, to select the *rôle* to win an artistic fame in, perhaps, the highest, as it is the most difficult of all art pursuits? We believe not.

Poor *Traviata!* Troubles did not end with Mr. Chorley, for three years after that gentleman's decease we read:—

"How many Traviatas of how many countries have died on the lyric stage since the lugubrious and equivocal three-act opera was produced at Venice in March 1853? . . . It would be a curious calculation to count the number of *prime donne* who have taken to this disagreeable part. . . . A nice discussion as to the degree of sauciness or of bashfulness with which the vocalists who enact the Traviata should invest the consumptive lady, who coughs *pianissimo* and sings *fortissimo* in her death-scene."[1]

Les Vêpres Siciliennes was produced at the Grand Opéra, Paris, on the 13th June 1855; so that this composition, with the *Trovatore* and *La Traviata*, must have been occupying Verdi's mind at one and the same period.

[1] *Athenæum*, 9th May 1874.

This was Verdi's first work written expressly for the French stage, and it was the more strange, therefore, to find him, an Italian composer, choosing as a subject the massacre of the French by the Sicilians; yet Verdi could scarcely refuse Scribe's story of the wholesale slaughter of 1282.

An amusing incident delayed the production of the work, for Mlle. Sophie Cruvelli, for some unexplained reason, ran away and could not be found. When at last she was traced, it was to the Strasburg theatre, where the runaway was captured and quietly escorted to Paris. A *warm* reception awaited her; but it so happened that her first words on her *rentrée* were those of Valentine in *Les Huguenots:* "Tell me the result of your daring journey,"—an *à propos* which fairly defeated those who were going to hiss and hoot! They laughed heartily and cheered instead, reflecting over some fresh announcement of *Les Vêpres Siciliennes.* At length this came. Month after month had been spent in rehearsals, but at last all was ready. The reception given to the opera was of the most enthusiastic description, Mlle. Cruvelli receiving a perfect storm of applause for her efforts

in the representation. Other artists in the cast were Mlle. Saunier and Messieurs Gueymard, Boulo, Bonnehée, Obin, and Coulon.

I Vespri Siciliani—to give the opera its Italian title—pleased the French immensely; but the Italians cared not greatly for its music, even when adapted to a new poem entitled *Giovanna di Guzman.*

In the year 1859 it was brought to London, and presented at Drury Lane Theatre (27th July), being mounted with great care and creditable splendour. The principal artists, who performed with great effect, were Madame Titiens and Signori Mongini and Fagotti, and at the time the opera was adjudged by the *dilettanti* one of the happiest efforts of its composer; although, as events have proved, the later English judgment has not set a particularly high value upon this work.

Writing for the Parisian stage, Verdi appears to have deemed it necessary to copy the grandiose style of the Grand Opéra, to which he sacrificed that vein of sweet, natural, Italian melody which had won him his success. "Several *morceaux*," wrote a critic of this London introduction, "were much applauded, but the performance went off heavily as a whole;

and we hardly think that those who sat it out will feel much tempted to do so again. Five acts of a ponderous French *tragédie lyrique* are generally too much for English patience, unless sweeping measures of curtailment are resorted to; and this might be very advantageously done in the case of the *Vêpres Siciliennes*."[1]

One who was present thus writes of the circumstances: "But one novelty was given —*Les Vêpres Siciliennes*—which I had heard four years previously at the Grand Opéra, Paris, with Mlle. Cruvelli as the heroine. It failed here, as elsewhere, to maintain the reputation which Verdi had won by his *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, and one or two other works of minor importance. In the absence of Mlle. Cruvelli, who had retired from the stage, Mlle. Titiens undertook the part of the heroine; but although she laboured conscientiously to make something of it, it completely beat her, and she has been wise enough never again to waste her powers upon crudities that betray nothing else than leanness and want of resource by reason of their noise and eccentricity."[2]

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 30th July 1859.
[2] *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. ii. p. 325.

The Times was good enough to allow next day that the work was produced "with incontestable success." In criticising the music subsequently, *The Times*' critic said: "Though the piece of itself, in spite of its melodramatic and spectacular character, appears somewhat heavy and spun out, it is enriched with many of Signor Verdi's happiest thoughts. . . . In short, it may reasonably be concluded that the *Vespri Siciliani* will maintain its place amongst the best operas of its composer." [1]

Verdi, perhaps, made obeisance for such appreciation from *The Times*' critic, who from the first, it should in fairness be remarked, had spoken less disparagingly of Verdi's prospects as a musician than had the *Athenæum* critic. The prediction, however, that *I Vespri Siciliani* would maintain its place among the best operas of its composer, was singularly unfortunate as a piece of critical forecast, inasmuch as it has been sadly falsified. The reasons for this need not be discussed; suffice it to say that thousands who know and delight in the *Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, and *Rigoletto* music, have not heard the *Sicilian Vespers*. Thousands more

[1] *The Times*, 1st August 1859.

could not even distinguish the opera by its name.

The score that followed *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* was *Simon Boccanegra*. The management of the Fenice theatre sought another work from the first Italian master of the day, and *Simon Boccanegra* was the consequence. Once more the libretto was by Piave. This opera, produced on the 12th March 1857, proved a failure, a result that was attributed partly to the unsuitability of the leading singers, and partly to the feeble book. Later on, an attempt was made by Boito and Verdi to recast it; but neither Milan nor Paris would lend ears to the opera. Yet the following year it was given at Naples with enthusiasm. "Its first performance took place," wrote a critic, "on the 28th November 1858, and was crowned with the most complete success. The audience was densely crowded, and so brimful of enthusiasm that the *maestro* was called for seventeen times in course of the evening."[1] One of its best vocal numbers is the scena, "*Sento avvampar nell' anima*," with the aria, "*Cielo pietoso, rendila*," a thoroughly characteristic Verdinian

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 11th December 1858.

song, and one which might well be found in every tenor vocalist's *répertoire.*

Let it not be thought that Verdi was waning. Only a few months elapsed, and the *maestro* was ready with a work, *Un Ballo in Maschera,* which was to prove another triumph.

The original title was *Gustave III.*, but the police, watchful of Verdi, and freshened by the Orsini attempt upon Napoleon III.'s life, positively refused to permit an assassination scene to be played. Verdi was furious, and declined to adapt his music to other words, whereupon the management of the San Carlo Theatre at Naples (who had originally contracted for this work) sued Verdi for 200,000 francs damages. Soon the public learned the news. Then was there something resembling a revolution ; thousands of excited Neapolitans followed the musician wherever he went, shouting "*Viva Verdi!*" So heated did the feeling grow, steeped as it was with virulent political animosity, that the situation became dangerous, and eventually the authorities were glad to allow Verdi to depart "out of their coasts" with his opera under his arm. It next turned up at Rome. Jacovacci, the *impresario*

of the Teatro Apollo, wanted a novelty, and hearing of the squabble at Naples, sought Verdi and offered to take the opera. The official element insisted upon *some* alteration, but finally the opera was produced on 17th February 1859, and met with a splendid reception, once more sending Verdi's name and tunes over all Europe. The artists were, Mesdames Julienne Dejeau, Scotti, and Sbriscia, with Signori Fraschini and Giraldoni, but Verdi was not satisfied with their interpretation of his score.

On the 15th June 1861, *Un Ballo in Maschera* was produced at the Royal Opera, Lyceum, and met with an enthusiastic reception. The subject is the same as that of Auber's celebrated opera *Gustavus III.*—the assassination of the King of Sweden at a masked ball. Undoubtedly it is one of the best of Verdi's Second period operas. The audience were delighted with the music, and all good judges perceived that the work was in every sense a grand opera.

Un Ballo in Maschera, when produced for the first time in England, brought *The Times* again to the fore. "It presents enough," the review ran, "to show his (Verdi's) talent still

ripening, and his inventive faculty in its prime; but it cannot be regarded as 'his *Guillaume Tell*,' *Rigoletto* being out of all comparison a better work, while *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* (to say nothing of those earlier compositions *Nabucco* and *Ernani*) contain isolated passages of marked superiority. . . . Unquestionable as are the merits of his score, piece after piece demonstrates his musical inferiority to Auber. . . . To describe the opera scene after scene would be a work of supererogation. Its pretensions as a whole are not of a sort to call for technical analysis, or even to bear a very close scrutiny; while the beauties by which it is enriched (and they are frequent) *se déroulent*, as the French say, so easily, reveal themselves with such complacency, start out from the canvas, in short, in such bold relief and endowed with so marked an individuality, that they render themselves familiar at a glance, and put that into shade which, after all, is scarcely worth bringing to light—we mean the general framework in which they are set. Those pieces which are not the most likely to become popular, but which in the majority of instances are also, from a musical point of view, decidedly the

best, may be summed up in a 'catalogue' not over *raisonnée*." [1]

This criticism, unmarked though it be by any evident sympathy with Verdi's muse, might pass as a somewhat favourable estimate of an effort of Verdi's. But it is illogical. Upon reference to what appeared in *The Times* eight years before, respecting *Rigoletto*, we fail to trace a good word. "A very few (words) will suffice to recall its beauties. Its faults we have not space to describe. The continental critics have informed us that *Rigoletto* presented a transformation in Signor Verdi's style as complete as that of Beethoven when the Second Symphony was succeeded by the *Eroica*. A very attentive hearing, however, left us convinced that Signor Verdi's style in *Rigoletto* was much the same as in his other operas. There is certainly no difference. . . . Verdi is as essentially Verdi as in *Nabucco* and *Ernani*, with the proviso that in *Nabucco* and *Ernani* there are stirring tunes and flowing melodies which are nowhere to be met with in *Rigoletto*." [2]

Such language, and that which appears on page 110 is plain, unmistakable, emphatic.

[1] *The Times*, 17th June 1861. [2] *Ibid.*, 16th May 1853.

How, then, shall we read the line of comparative comment upon *Un Ballo in Maschera*—"*Rigoletto* being out of all comparison a better work"?

One more opera, and we must close this chapter. This was *La Forza del Destino*, the libretto of which by Piave was borrowed from a Spanish drama entitled *Don Alvar*. The work was a commission from the Imperial Theatre of St. Petersburg, and was produced there on the 10th November 1862. It was only a *succés d'estime*, the Court of Russia and the Muscovite populace not being greatly moved by it. Yet it was well rendered by Mesdames Barbot and Nautier-Didiée, with Signori Tamberlik, Graziani, Debassini, and Angelini. Precisely the same fate that attended the work in the Russian capital befel it at La Scala, Milan, in 1869, as well as at the Paris Théâtre Italien seven years later.

There was not a little that was restless and novel in *La Forza del Destino*, which probably accounts for its cool reception from those who were ready enough to welcome another of the old and approved Verdi operas. That change of style which was, later on, to show itself

so unmistakably in *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff* was beginning to possess the composer's mind. Sufficient of the new manner oozed out in *La Forza del Destino* for critics and analysts now to point to that opera as the work in which Verdi's Third style first begins to be traceable, and it can scarcely be surprising that an unprepared public failed to be impressed with the first hintings at a new style which had yet to be placed before the musical world in a matured and comprehendable state.

With this work, Verdi appeared to bid farewell for ever to the operatic stage; but, as all the world knows, a long artistic silence meant merely a retirement for the gathering up of resources that were to burst forth and bring Verdi into a perfect blaze of popularity.

CHAPTER VII

REQUIEM MASS AND OTHER COMPOSITIONS

Verdi as a sacred music composer—Share in the "Rossini" Mass—Failure of a patchwork effort—*Missa da Requiem* produced—Splendid reception—Performed at the Royal Albert Hall—Structure of the work—Von Bülow's opinion—Divided opinions on its style and merit—Its character—Modern Italian Church style—Northern *versus* Southern Church music—Verdi's early compositions—E minor Quartet for Strings—*L' Inno delle Nazioni*—Its performance at Her Majesty's Theatre—Verdi's slender share in orchestral music—National temperament involved—Thematic method inconsistent with Italian national life.

VERDI must not be overlooked as a writer of sacred music. Hundreds of composers have contributed more freely than he has to the store of ecclesiastical music, and although strict Church musicians might contend that, from many points of view, any consideration of Verdi as a sacred composer would be unnecessary, yet, withal, there is ample reason for considering and comparing the religious, as distinct from the secular, musician in Verdi.

Like his great compatriot Rossini, who,

towards the close of his career, composed a *Stabat Mater* that has provoked, perhaps, more criticism than any other piece of Church music, Verdi has signalled his later years with a sacred composition which has also been the subject of much discussion.

In order to do honour to Rossini, whose death was being deplored, some of Italy's sons conceived the notion of a grand Mass to be performed once every hundred years, on the centenary of Rossini's death, and nowhere else save at the Cathedral of Bologna. There was, at least, the charm of novelty in such an idea, and considering the period of time that was to elapse between the performances, the prospect of the music ever becoming hackneyed was certainly remote. But the greatest difficulty, the serious patchwork venture of such a mixed composition, does not appear to have entered the heads of the promoters. Thirteen numbers for a Mass were given out to the leading Italian composers, who entered into the spirit of the plan with an unanimity worthy of a better cause, and such numbers were duly completed; but when it came to the tacking together of these pieces, the result was a thorough Joseph's coat, as vari-coloured as that

famous garment, and so unsatisfactory that the committee decided that it would never do, even for a once-a-century performance.

Then came the question of a way out of the difficulty. Who should be entrusted with the commission for a complete work? Now the thirteenth number—a lucky quantity on this occasion—was the *Libera me* in C minor, by Verdi, which so attracted the attention of Signor Mazzucato of Milan, that he begged Verdi to take upon himself the responsibility of composing a complete *Requiem* Mass. This suggestion seems to have clung to him, for, as all the world knows, he eventually gave us that *magnum opus* with which most amateurs in this country are already familiar. Strangely enough, Rossini's name dropped out of association with the new mass, which, when it was produced, was to honour the memory of Manzoni, Italian poet-patriot, who, full of years, joined the ever-increasing majority on 22nd May 1873.

The first performance of this *Missa da Requiem* took place in the church of San Marco at Milan on the 22nd May 1874, to mark the anniversary of the death of Manzoni, the composer's old friend, whom—to quote

Verdi's own words—"I regarded so much as a writer, and venerated as a man—one who was a model of virtue and patriotism." Musicians and *dilettanti* from all parts of the world attended this notable performance, which Verdi conducted in person. There was an orchestra of one hundred executants, and a chorus of some hundred and twenty singers, while the *soli* parts were entrusted to Mesdames Stolz and Waldmann, with Signori Capponi and Maini; and since these musicians were leading performers, gathered from all parts of Italy, the effect of such a combined artist-effort was striking and enthusiastic indeed. The fine mass was splendidly performed, and as number after number was unfolded before the rapt congregation, its impressiveness and grandeur held every listener spellbound. The solemn beauty of the "*Offertorium*," "*Sanctus*," and "*Dies Iræ*" proved specially noticeable, and must have seriously suggested to the late Dr. von Bülow, who was present criticising the work, that beautiful part-writing was an art not altogether unknown to the Italian musician.

The pent-up interest in the score was, however, soon to give vent. In order to

afford many others an opportunity of hearing the mass, and of expressing their feelings spontaneously, Verdi permitted it to be performed three times at La Scala Theatre, undertaking, good-naturedly, to conduct the first performance. Then on Monday, the 25th May, the theatre was crammed with an audience which — no longer restrained by sacred surroundings — shouted applause from beginning to end of the work. Several of the numbers were encored, and more than once the vast crowd of people rose *en masse* crying, "*Viva Verdi!*"

In 1874 (4th June) the work was given in Paris, at one of the Salle Favart "Matinées Spirituelles," when the same solo singers as at Milan rendered the mass superbly. Later on it was brought to England, and a memorable performance of it took place at the Royal Albert Hall, when Verdi himself wielded the *bâton*. This was on Saturday afternoon, 15th May 1875. The soloists were Madame Stolz (soprano), Madame Waldmann (contralto), Signor Masini (tenor), and Signor Medini (bass), who were supported by the powerful choral and instrumental resources for which this great music hall is famous. The exact com-

plement of the band was 150, while the chorus numbered some 500 to 600 singers. Upon making his appearance Verdi, as may be imagined, received a tremendous ovation, for he had not been in London since 1847, when he attended the production of his opera *I Masnadieri* at the Royal Italian Opera. The master proved a good conductor, his style and method as a *chef d'orchestre* being as firm and assuring for his forces as it was attractive and instructive to the audience that watched his beat. The performance was in every sense a success, and marked with all that enthusiasm which the presence of a great artist always provokes, albeit the effects realised in Milan and Paris were, it was generally admitted, not attained in so vast a hall. The numbers that seemed to please most were the "*Lachrymosa dies illa*," the "*Agnus Dei*" duet, and the double chorus "*Sanctus*."

From this and subsequent renderings of the *Requiem*, the general English public have formed whatever judgment it may now entertain of the work. These opinions are not necessarily correct, since they are based, as unscientific opinions about music generally are, upon the attractiveness rather than on the

intrinsic worth of the music as Church or ecclesiastical art-work.

The Mass is comprised in the following seven numbers:—

1. "*Requiem*" and "*Kyrie*" for quartet and chorus.

2. "*Dies Iræ*"—in four parts, solo and chorus, with trio for soprano, contralto, and tenor.

3. "*Offertorium.*"

4. "*Sanctus*"—fugue, with double chorus.

5. "*Agnus Dei*"—duet and chorus, soprano and contralto.

6. "*Lux Æterna*"—trio for soprano, tenor, and bass.

7. "*Libera me*"—soprano solo, chorus, and fugue finale.

These combine to make up a fairly perfect example of the modern Italian grand mass.

The late Dr. Hans von Bülow declared this work to be a monstrosity, and when it was performed at the Paris Opéra Comique, although the enthusiasm quite equalled that evoked at Milan, the opinion in the *foyer* was divided as to whether the mass was a sacred or a secular work! Here was a serious blot for a great man's composition which aimed at

being sacred, both in intent and tone. Fearlessly the purists persisted in their charge that the work was purely secular and operatic in style. Other alleged defects of the mass were subsequently discovered. For instance, one writer declared that "there are more than a hundred mistakes in the progression of the parts." Was all this true?

When, at the age of sixty-one, Verdi surprised the musical world (which, up to that time, had known him only as an opera composer) with a composition for the Church, anxiety was great to catch the ravishing melodist as a creator of ecclesiastical music. This done, it was possible to admit that the style of the great *Requiem* was elevated, even pathetic, in its religious expression, replete with youthful fire. *Soli*, *ensembles*, and choruses were, by their masterly polyphony, adjudged worthy of Mendelssohn himself. Some ground for such praise really existed, for here and there Verdi, in the *Requiem*, even approaches Mozart in depth of feeling, while his manner of expression is allied to the modern classical school.

Indisputably, however, Verdi's *Requiem* is an Italian mass, both in character and colour.

Its prevailing features are identical with those of the *Stabat Mater* and the *Messe Solennelle* of Rossini. There is local colour, the atmosphere of which can never be dispelled; besides, too, comes a flood of luxuriant, entrancing melody, characteristic of the Italian operatic school. All southern nations, the Italians especially, love sound for the sensuous effect it produces. They love not laboured theoretical art. Is this admissible in Church music? Rapturous, unctuous music is not permanently strengthening and soul-raising. Emotionally, it carries to a great height, only to lead to a reaction, and to some lower estimate of music that captivates but does not elevate. In the *Requiem*, there is abundant theoretical workmanship—more such evidence than is usually met with in modern Italian Church music; yet, although this was the studied purpose of the musician, it has not enabled Verdi to rid himself of characteristics which stamp southern musical art as plainly as they do the architecture and the person. Sensuous and exciting music is acceptable enough in its way, but it does not constitute good Church music. It is this character, inseparable from the Italian nature,

that forbids an unqualified acceptation of the *Missa da Requiem* as a contribution to the store of best Church music. None but the wildest partizans could deny, however, that in this mass Verdi has given to the world some of the finest music he ever wrote; he has, moreover, furnished abundant proof of his scholarship as a theorist, showing that he really was able to do more than string tempting melodies together to please the capacities of the *polloi*.

While approved musical taste remains what it is, and does not degenerate, modern Italian Church music will not be highly regarded for use in the sanctuary. Northern and southern Europe are much wider apart in Church musical style than they are geographically; and all sound musicians know where to look for that style and expression which most nearly approach the ecclesiastical ideal. The *stila fugata* is nobler and sterner than the straightforward melody sumptuously accompanied, so that the Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven mass, and the *oratorii* of Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, and Spohr, furnish a far more appropriate, and adequate, sacred musical manner than does anything that is

Italian. With the Teuton style come mysticism and reverence; with the Italian passion and secularism, the latter ill-suited indeed to profound doctrines propounded at Church altars. A melody may be as ample a medium for religious expression as an eight-voice fugue; hence, it is not imperative that Italian musicians should practise writing oratorios on a wholesale scale before essaying Church music. It is not the medium, however, that we are contending against. Some of the greatest, grandest prayers have been expressed in simplest song. It is the colouring element, the atmosphere, pervading southern Church music which, being operatic, renders such music inadmissible by the side of German and English religious art. This objectionable feature stamps Verdi's *Requiem* from beginning to end. The score is impregnated with the world, and not with the cloister. The Italian worshipper must have movement and action, rather than reflection, even in his devotional music. As we think, the contemplative mood rather than the persuasive is the one to inspire, as well as to promote, a due appreciation of lofty things, and a religious service. This, Teuton music sup-

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plies, but the modern Italian article does not. The old Italian masters remembered the altar, not the stage, so that the masses of musicians like Palestrina, Marcello, Caldara, and Lotti are infinitely more reverent in tone and reach than their modern successors. Let it not be forgotten, *en passant*, that the Germans stand indebted to the Italians for the fugue, transmitted to them in some instances, in as fully developed a manner as could be desired, and in certain features unsurpassable in its completeness.

If Verdi's *Requiem*, however, does not attain to perfection as Church music, it is, nevertheless, a grand work, a masterpiece in originality and scholarly treatment that will always be listened to with admiration, whether in oratory or concert hall. Like Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, it will doubtless be rendered from time to time by choral bodies in quest of effective performing works; but no sound Church musician will ever seriously regard it as an example of what Church music should be, or is ever likely to become. Probably it will be one of the scores that, with his Third period operas, will best preserve Verdi's name, but it will never carry

the *maestro* into the company of the world's great sacred composers.

Besides this contribution to sacred music, Verdi composed other works outside his universally known operas. He was not the busy, successful, creative musician at one bound. Between the ages of thirteen and eighteen he wrote several marches for a brass band, some short symphonies, six concertos, and variations for pianoforte, which he used to play himself; many serenatas, cantatas, arias, duets, trios, a small *Stabat Mater*, and some Church compositions. During the three years that he remained at Milan, he composed two symphonies, and a cantata, and upon his return to Busseto he wrote a mass, a vesper, and three *Tantum Ergos*, besides composing music to Manzoni's tragedies. In 1880 a *Paternoster* for five voices fell from his pen; and an *Ave Maria* for soprano solo is a cherished composition.

With one notable exception, Verdi, having taken to vocal composition, never left it for essays in the realm of instrumental music. This exception is a Quartet in E minor for strings, which has been played on more than one occasion at the Monday Popular Concerts. It must be admitted to be an unequal work—the first and

last movements having but little interest, while the second and third are more spontaneous and attractive. It is not likely to become a classic, however, nor will interest attach to it so much for its merit and worth as for its being the single piece of chamber music with which the English public are familiar from the pen of the famous *Trovatore* master. But for an enforced leisure this quartet might never have been written. Verdi was at Naples superintending the rehearsal of one of his operas, when suddenly one of the principal singers was seized with an indisposition. This brought matters to a standstill; when, not to be idle, Verdi set about the composition of this quartet.

All these early compositions, save the symphonies, the tragedies, and quartet music, are lost, but as they were probably more adapted for civic archives, as samples of youthful industry, rather than as inspirations of genius, this is not to be greatly deplored. It remains to be added that—with Auber (France), Meyerbeer (Germany), Sterndale Bennett (England)—Verdi (Italy) wrote the cantata "*L' Inno delle Nazioni*" for the International Exhibition of 1862; but the work was not performed at the Exhibition because of some

expression of feeling on the part of the late Sir Michael Costa. The final rejection of it by the Commissioners gave rise to much comment at the time. It was subsequently given at Her Majesty's Theatre, 24th May 1862, and repeated the following Tuesday.

The scene is supposed to be the interior of the new Crystal Palace on the opening day, when people of all nations are assembled under the wondrous roof.

Musically its form is a solo rendered by one of the people, to which the whole gathering join in universal chorus.

"The cantata," we are told, "was admirably got up and performed. The solo part was magnificently sung by Mdlle. Titiens; and the chorus, two hundred and fifty strong, included the most eminent members of the company. On the first night the reception of the performance was enthusiastic. The whole piece was encored, and repeated with increased spirit and effect. Signor Verdi was called for several times, and when he presented himself, led forward first by Mdlle. Titiens, and then by Signor Giuglini, he was received with reiterated acclamations."[1]

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 31st May 1862.

In the instrumental department of music Verdi has accomplished, as indeed he has attempted, but little. This is in keeping with the habit of his countrymen. Italians possess neither the industry nor the application requisite to plan and build a vast orchestral conception. They bask under an azure sky, while other men slave in the privacy of their closets and studios. It is reserved for the Teuton, with all his wondrous plodding, to frame and make grand tone-poems, lavish with ideal intent and richest colour, which become subjects of admiration and wonder the more it is realised that orchestral resource alone is the agent employed. The southern climate does not conduce to exertion and serious application; and the Italian, necessarily, wants some rousing to enter the lists with the weather-bound Teuton, in the construction of laborious examples of art demanding the exercise of the highest orchestral study and exposition. Further, Italians have an instinctive tendency towards vocal music. They can create it as naturally as they sing it, and it is no concern to them to write a melody, or sketch a lightly-contrived orchestral piece in the snug corner of a café, or behind the shelter-

ing blind of a sun-pierced *osteria*. Fugue, canon, double counterpoint, charm not the Italians. They don't catch the meaning of the term *development* in theoretical art, and if they succeed in a distinct rhythm, simply harmonised, with a well-balanced period, the musical desire is satisfied. Without development there can be no such thing as a great orchestral structure. A theme must be taken and worked out in the wondrous Beethoven fashion ere anything instrumental worth the name of a symphony or overture can be evolved. All this means musical patience and application, which Italians have not; otherwise overtures to Italian operas would be something else than melodies of the opera, announced to the audience at the outset, in order to acquaint them with choice tunes that are to follow.

CHAPTER VIII

THIRD PERIOD OPERAS

A matured style—Methusaleh of Opera—The last link—*Aïda*—A higher art plane—Ismail Pacha commissions *Aida*—Its libretto—Production at Cairo—The argument—Patti as *Aïda*—*Athenæum* criticism of *Aïda*—*Otello*—Scene in Milan—The initial cast—Its production and reception in London and Paris—*Athenæum* review of *Otello*—Its story—Vocal and instrumental qualities—*Falstaff*—A surprise defeated—Boito—*Falstaff* produced at La Scala—In France—*Falstaff* at Covent Garden—The comedy and its music—*Athenæum* opinion of *Falstaff*—A crowning triumph.

We venture upon the Third and last, the "mature" period in Verdi's great career. It forms a truly interesting phase of a long life, because it has proved productive of his best music. This later work places Verdi at the head of his profession, and among the most remarkable men of the century. That, when verging on sixty years of age, he should submit *Aïda*, an opera abounding in the strength, vitality, and freedom of youth, constituted a musical event that was greeted

with enthusiasm by the whole artistic world; but it was regarded as something more extraordinary when, fifteen years later, the great creative faculty of the master found vent in *Otello*. This achievement won the admiration of lovers of art and letters throughout the globe. Yet that stroke was to be surpassed. Five years later, when the *maestro* was eighty years of age, to the astonishment of everybody, *Falstaff* was given to the world. No wonder that Verdi has been styled the "grand old man" of music.

The genesis of *Aïda* was on this wise. Ismail Pacha, Khedive of Egypt, desired a novelty for the inauguration of the new Italian theatre at Cairo, and sought a brand-new opera, on the composer's own terms. Verdi — consulting pupil Muzio — named the sum of £4000 sterling, to which the Khedive agreed. The feeling was towards a work with local colour and interest; hence the *Aïda* book—the joint production of Mariette Bey, M. C. du Cocle, and Signor Ghislanzoni —was decided upon.

In a few months the score was completed; meanwhile the scenery and costumes were being prepared in Paris. But there proved to

be no heed for haste. The Franco-German war broke out, and for several months the art of painter and costumier was locked up in the besieged city. At length the eventful day for the production of *Aïda* came round, however, and the work was given for the first time publicly, at the Cairo theatre, on Sunday, 24th January 1871. The cast was as follows:—*Aïda*, Madame Pozzoni-Anastasi; *Amnéris*, Madame Grossi; *Radamès*, Signor Mongini; *Ramfis*, Signor Medini; *Amonasro*, Signor Costa; *King*, Signor Steller, with Signor Bottesini as conductor, because Verdi, having a horror of the sea and given to *mal de mer*, could not be induced to make the journey to Cairo. The final rehearsal lasted from seven in the evening until half-past three the next morning, while the performance itself was one of the most gorgeous that had graced even the Egyptian capital. Crowds were turned from the doors, and those who had seats might have sold them, to use a common and hardly accurate expression, for their weight in gold.

Notabilities of every country were there, sharing the evident enthusiasm of the Khedive, who, when the representation was concluded, sent a telegram to Verdi congratulating him

heartily upon the success and excellence of the work. The excitement was immense, and the salvoes of applause that greeted number after number of the opera were easily heard outside the walls of the theatre, There was only one opinion about *Aïda.* On all sides it was adjudged a masterpiece, the finest work that had been issued from the master's pen. From Cairo *Aïda* was taken to La Scala Theatre (17th February 1872), and subsequently it was presented at the Théâtre Italien in Paris, where in three successive seasons it had some seventy representations. In 1876 it was produced for the first time in England at Covent Garden Theatre; and a French version of the opera was also given at the Paris Opéra on 22nd March 1880.

The scene of the opera is laid at Memphis and at Thebes during the rule of the Pharaohs over Egypt. Aïda, daughter of Amonasro, King of Ethiopia, having fallen into the hands of the Egyptians, is brought back a prisoner into Egypt, where her grace and beauty win for her a place as slave to Amnéris, the Egyptian king's daughter. In this association she is seen by Radamès, a captain, and eventually commander-in-chief of the Egyptian

troops. Amnéris, entertaining a secret affection for this young soldier in her father's service, becomes alarmed on finding that the bearing of Aïda shows her to be similarly affected. Her jealousy is aroused, and she vows vengeance on her rival. Amonasro then comes into prominence. A prisoner in one of the battles between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians, he is brought to Egypt, no one save Aïda knowing his rank, for he was fighting as an officer merely. As a reward for his martial services, the Egyptian king offers Radamès his daughter's hand in marriage, which, seeing that he is deeply in love with Aïda, places him in a difficult position. Amonasro meanwhile gets scent of the affection between Aïda and Radamès, and discovering their trysting-place, urges his daughter to induce Radamès to betray his country. This he does, and being seized, is tried, found guilty, and condemned by the sacred council to be buried alive. Amnéris, the king's daughter, secures for him her father's pardon, on his consenting to abandon Aïda for ever. This he refuses to do, for he prefers the slave to the mistress. On the stone being lowered which is to immure him in a living tomb, he is

seen with Aïda by his side, she having contrived to penetrate into the dark vault of the Temple of Phtha in order to prove her constancy and love, by sharing his fate, and like Romeo and Juliet, dying together. Such is briefly the story of the *Aïda* libretto.

A close study of the plot shows it to be neither strictly logical nor consistent; at the same time the book abounds with striking and sensational situations, appreciated alike by musicians and dramatists.

That empress of song, Madame Patti, created the principal character in *Aïda* when it was first given in this country on the 23rd June 1876. The other principal singers were Mdlle. Ernestina Gindale (Amnéris), Signori Nicolini (Radamès), Graziani (Amonasro), Capponi (Ramfis), and M. Feitlinger (King of Egypt). As every frequenter of the opera who can recall that eventful night will remember, it was a brilliant night. The Royal box was fully tenanted, including the Prince and Princess of Wales, with the Princes Albert Ernest and George Frederick. The cantatrice thrilled the audience by the purity and tenderness of her singing, notably in her delivery of Aïda's agonised soliloquy in the third act. In

no previous part had she shown greater powers, and the assumption of the part placed her in the front rank of lyric *tragèdiennes*. On all sides it was admitted that Verdi had achieved a great and unexampled success. The main topic was the new order of Verdi's music in *Aïda*, of which more in another chapter.

In 1876 something much like a change of front takes place on the part of the *Athenæum*. It no longer gives Verdi his *congé*, but blames the English directors for allowing four years to elapse before producing *Aïda*:—"The reputation of Signor Verdi ought to have induced the directors to bring out, as promptly as possible, any new opera by him."[1] Referring to *Aïda* the notice runs:—"The consecration scene, in which Radamès is invested with the command of the Egyptian army, is highly dramatic; still finer is the *finale* of the second act. Here are found the most telling points, for the composer revels in the expression of extreme emotion; he has varied and conflicting passions to set; there is the glorification of the return of a victorious general with his army; there is the lament of the Ethiopian prisoners; there is the exultation of Amnéris at her father,

[1] *Athenæum*, 1st July 1876.

the King, having awarded her to Radamès as the prize for his valour; there are the suppressed tones of vengeance of Amonasro, who is not recognised as the Ethiopian monarch and warrior in his thraldom; and there is the deep despair of Aïda at losing Radamès, and her grief at her father being in the hands of his enemies. The effect of the *ensemble* is most imposing; the parts are well and distinctly defined, and to the individual bursts are added the choral and orchestral combinations. This *finale* is the grandest number in the entire score; there is no other situation in which there is such variety and power. There are no less than six duets in the four acts, but in no one of them is there consistent and coherent writing; there are isolated breaks of beauty, such as passages here and there in the duet between Aïda and Amnéris, 'Amore! amore!' in the second act, in which the Egyptian princess discovers that she has a rival in her Ethiopian slave, who is a prisoner; and in the two duets in the third act, the first between Aïda and her father Amonasro, in which she is forced to turn spy in the subsequent *duo* with her lover Radamès, and induce him to disclose the secret pass by which his

troops may be attacked by the enemy. The two duets in the last act—the first in which Amnéris endeavours to persuade Radamès to sue for pardon, and the second in the vault under the temple between Aïda and Radamès, 'Morir! si pura e bella'—are also excellent. There are few solos. The first is for the tenor, 'Celeste Aïda'; the second is the *scena* of Aïda, 'L' insana parola,' when she learns that Radamès is to be the chief to attack her father's army; the third is the *romanza* of Aïda in the third act, 'O cieli azzurri,' recalling the beauties of her own country; and the final solo is that of Amnéris while listening to the trial and condemnation in the vault of Radamès for his treason. The characteristics of these solos are peculiarly those of Signor Verdi, but their finest features forcibly recall airs which he has composed from other operas—thus the Miserere theme of the *Trovatore* is paraphrased more than once. The work is very heavily scored—over-instrumented in the brass particularly, and it would exact double the number and twice the tone of the strings at Covent Garden to counterbalance the blatant effects. But there are also some remarkably interesting parts in

the orchestration; the prelude or overture is short, but it conveys the notion of the Eastern story which follows. It is dreamy and charmingly coloured; the March is magnificent, and is sure to be played by our military bands even if they do not possess the six long Egyptian trumpets used by Signor Verdi. . . . It is true that the composer in seeking for scientific combinations has not shown his former spontaneity, and that his themes are at times commonplace, while his instrumentation generally is too ponderous; but there are redeeming features in the elaborate score sufficient to prove that he still maintains that peculiar ascendency over the sympathies of audiences which asserts itself in striking situations so vividly. In short, Signor Verdi has the faculty, amidst trivialities, of never writing an opera in which there is not some display of emotional and sensational power."[1]

Of this criticism it is but fair to the *Athenæum* to state that, as regards the "excessive orchestration," it is consistent with one of the late Mr. Chorley's old charges; but in all other respects the apostate Verdi appears now to have claims both for the fullest admiration and attention.

[1] *Athenæum*, 1st July 1876.

A curious episode in connection with the publication of *Aïda* was the provocation it gave to one Signor Vincenzo Sassaroli, who was most surprisingly perturbed because of the success of the opera and the *Requiem* mass. He could not conceive how publisher and public could see anything in such music, and he went so far as to write to Ricordi challenging a setting of the *Aïda* libretto, which he would undertake upon certain conditions. The avowed object of the challenge was to prove to the world of art that the book could be set better than it had been!

Passing over *Montezuma*, in five acts, which Verdi completed in 1878, and which was given for the first time at La Scala, Milan, we come to the master's next great Shakespearean setting—*Otello*.

Otello, a lyric drama in four acts, with a book by Arrigo Boito, proved the second of the composer's matured period works. It was on the 5th February 1887 that Milan—Otellopolis, as it had been for the nonce christened—was all astir because that *Otello* was to be positively performed. Soon after daybreak the whole city was a mass of mixed, excited humanity—faces known and unknown from

every part of the world—all bent on one eternal theme, Verdi and *Otello*. Ere 7 P.M. that evening La Scala was packed from pit to dome with perhaps the most brilliant audience that had ever filled the famous theatre. Faccio was to conduct, and no sooner did the distinguished leader appear than thunders of applause burst from all parts of the house, so feverishly expectant was every one concerning the music that was about to be unfolded. No overture, but a few preliminary bars of tempest music, and the curtain rose to a scene on the island of Cyprus, with Iago, Roderigo, and Cassio in evidence.

It was an open secret that an excellent libretto had been prepared by Boito, one to which the strictest of Shakespearean students could hardly take exception; and as number after number of the music proceeded, it became equally apparent that another great opera was born to the world. True, Boito had ignored the first act of the immortal bard's drama, and thus robbed Verdi of the chance of setting that fine declamatory passage: "Most noble, grave, and reverend seigneurs"; but the librettist had to curtail somewhere, and this first act was the rejected one.

The cast on this eventful night included Signora Romilda Pantaleoni (Desdemona), Signor Tamagno (Otello), M. Maurel (Iago), with Signori Fornari and Paroli as Roderigo and Cassio respectively, the part of Emilia being filled by Mdlle. Petrovich—artists who, on the whole, did justice to the masterly music put into their mouths. At the conclusion of the performance Verdi was called forward some twenty times amid a scene of enthusiasm, and the waving of hats and handkerchiefs, indescribable. The excited people yoked themselves to the *maestro's* carriage, and drew him at a vexatiously slow pace (in order that he might catch the applause) to his hotel; and those who retired to rest that night did so to the accompaniment of singing and cries for Verdi, which had not ceased when all good people should have been asleep. There was a perfect *Otello*-Verdi mania.

Verdi admittedly had written another grand opera, and the great problem was how, at the age of seventy-four, the composer could produce such a masterpiece. In design and execution it was equal if not superior to *Aïda*—far surpassing in construction any of his First or Second period works. No dis-

sentient voices could be raised in the general chorus of praise, the opinion being that from first to last the music was as extraordinary as it was magnificent. There was grandeur, as there was learning; and when the technical skill did not attract the attention, it was the surpassing beauty, the seemingly inspired nature of the music that won both heart and ear.

It is not surprising that all the European capitals clamoured to hear a work of such masterly force and skill, and it is creditable to our country's art instincts to find that the opera was given at the Lyceum Theatre in July 1889, or within little more than two years after its production at Milan. The chief singers included Signora Cataneo (Desdemona), with Signori Tamagno (Otello), Paroli (Cassio), and M. Maurel (Iago). Then an excellent exposition of the work resulted.

On this occasion the *Athenæum* stated:—"Verdi in *Aïda* cut himself adrift from the conventionalities of Italian opera, and produced a work almost perfectly beautiful, glowing with Oriental colour, and dependent to a very slight extent upon the special devices of Wagnerian music drama. In *Otello* we miss

the special characteristics which lend such a charm to *Aïda*, and are disposed to judge it with severity on account of the composer's rashness in selecting a Shakspearean subject. . . . The first point that strikes the hearer with regard to the music is its essentially modern character combined with its freedom from direct Wagnerian influences. Verdi in his latest score has adopted even less of Wagner's peculiar methods than he did in *Aïda*. Much has been made of the so-called 'kiss' motive, and we may note a harsh progression in consecutive fifths and octaves which appears two or three times, and is apparently intended to suggest the torture of jealousy, but of *Leitmotive* in the accepted sense there is not one. . . . From hence to the close the music is fragmentary, but intensely dramatic, and as impressive as any operatic music ever penned. An exquisitely touching effect is produced by the use made of the love theme from the first act, and, speaking generally, this final scene is a worthy crown to a work which, if not the finest Verdi has written, is at any rate a splendid example of modern Italian art."[1]

[1] *Athenæum*, 13th July 1889.

Yet, if such criticism were insufficient to prove that there was, as there had been all along, something of merit in Verdi and his music, we find it accentuated two years later when *Otello* was given at the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden. On this occasion we are told:—"If the score is less equal in inspiration and less remarkable for glowing picturesqueness than that of *Aïda*, it is worthy to rank with that beautiful work, and moreover affords ample proof that a composer of genius can satisfy the requirements of modern opera; that is to say, give full play to the dramatic flow of the story without slavishly following the special devices of Wagnerian music drama. In this sense *Otello* may be regarded as a model for composers of *opera seria* apart from its own intrinsic value, which is very great."[1]

On the 12th October 1894 a French version of *Otello* was given at the Paris Opéra, when Verdi himself attended, superintended the rehearsals, and conducted. All Paris was strongly represented on this gala occasion, and no pains or expense were spared upon the performance. The presence of the veteran composer in the

[1] *Athenæum*, 18th July 1891.

conductor's seat naturally gave zest to this performance, and it is doubtful whether a more enthusiastic reception was ever experienced by Verdi. Applause followed applause, until it was abundantly clear that Verdi had secured another triumph, and that Paris, as well as London and Milan, had approved of the composer's masterly achievements in *Otello.*

Wherever performed, the especially beautiful numbers of the work have speedily been detected. In the first act, which sounds somewhat on Verdi's conventional lines, the storm prayer, the festal music, and a love duet are particularly fine. The second act includes a great scene for Iago, a duet between Cassio and Iago, and a quartet, the whole finishing with a stirring duet between Otello and Iago. This act is full of declamation, which though helped on by the *cantilena* passages, and beginning with the garden *fête* to the sound of *mandolini,* seems a little monotonous. The quartet, however, between Desdemona, Otello, Iago, and Emilia, is extremely interesting, and supplies as fine a piece of choral writing as Verdi has ever penned. In the third act is an abundance of picturesque

theatrical music, such as Verdi could well write, for it is one of his great gifts to know exactly what the public prefer. An interpolation in the original text now provides the "handkerchief" trio for Cassio, Otello, and Iago, which in music and poetry is one of the best pieces in the opera. This is followed by a pathetic duet between Desdemona and her jealous lord, and after much fine dramatic writing, suggested in the main by the masterly additions which Boito has made to the original text in this act, we reach the conclusion where Iago, with his foot on the Moor's heart, answers the chorus with malignant triumph. "The lion is here!" This is a highly dramatic, superb situation in the opera, and never fails to elicit the loudest applause. Desdemona's "Willow" song, with its horn and bassoon accompaniment, has rarely been equalled by Verdi; while the "*Ave Maria,*" partly in monotone, and partly in *cantilena* phrases accompanied by the strings, is of most exquisite heavenly nature. In the fourth and concluding Act, Otello kills his wife, spares Iago, and stabs himself, and this is generally acknowledged as the finest part of the work. It abounds with beautiful,

luxuriant music, in Verdi's choicest vein, while its intense dramatic character is unsurpassed by anything in the range of opera music. In it, Verdi and all his vast dramatic-musical powers rise to their fullest height.

Considered as a whole, *Otello* must be accounted a very fine opera, a model of *opera seria* amid all the influence, fashion, and revolution in modern music. Its various beautiful *soli* pieces, its bold and vigorous choruses, the grand finales, the highly finished duets and quartets, and lastly, but not least, its declamatory music, with the striking and effective recitatives—all this renders the vocal portion well-nigh beyond criticism. The orchestration is particularly remarkable. Here Verdi has surpassed himself, and given us page after page of dramatic tone-painting of the highest order. Rarely has any opera composer shown us anything so dramatic as the finale representing the reception of the delegates from Venice, and the Moor's insulting treatment of his wife. In the first act, the tempest music is wonderfully effective and well conceived, and the second act is full of masterly instrumental device and combination. The grand workings of the orchestra in the

"*Credo*" in this Act could not be surpassed. This same high standard is, on the whole, maintained throughout the third act; while the composer's vocal and instrumental work in the fourth and concluding act is admitted by all judges to be one of the grandest instances of modern orchestral manipulation.

Great as Verdi had been before the production of *Otello*, and greater still as he became through *Otello*, there remained yet a further measure of greatness for the justly-famed Italian art king. Those who appreciated and wondered at, to say nothing of listening with delight and amazement to, the superlative musical beauties of *Aïda* and *Otello*, had yet greater things in store for them. When the composer was busy upon the *Otello* music, the villagers and others in and around Busseto knew that the master was employed upon serious music. He wore a troubled look, and the expression of his face was one of tragic austerity. Brusque, wrapped up, impatient, he was far from pleasant to deal with, so different from his usual courteous manner and bearing towards the residents. Later, there was a change. A smile played about the composer's lips, he was jovial, open mannered,

happy. The peasants and others about the hamlet declared that the composer was in a merry mood; they surmised, and rightly enough, that he was engaged upon some comedy music. This was *Falstaff*.

The idea of a lyrical comedy taken from Shakespeare haunted Verdi some time before he wrote *Falstaff*. He spoke to M. Maurel about it, and the latter, in 1890, sent him the version of *The Taming of the Shrew* arranged by Paul Delair for Coquelin the elder. Verdi returned the manuscript, and wrote from Genoa, saying it was superb, and that he envied the musician whose lot it would be to compose to it; but, as far as he was concerned it was too late. Nearly two years afterwards he told Maurel why it was too late: "Boito and I had planned a lyrical comedy, now nearly finished. It is to be called *Falstaff*."

Verdi composed the music between 1890 and 1892, and the opera was produced for the first time at La Scala, Milan, on 9th February 1893. It was hailed, and justly so, with enthusiasm, as one of the most remarkable works that ever met the ear inside the walls of that historic opera-house. Musicians from all parts of the world sped to Milan to hear

the score concerning which gossip had long been busy—so busy, as to be annoying to Verdi, who wished this, his first comic opera, to burst as a surprise upon the musical world in its complete and final form, instead of being made the subject of anticipation and discussion for at least two years beforehand.

Boito's libretto is, perhaps, the best written and planned book ever presented to a composer. The subject is one of Shakespeare's best, and the librettist has throughout kept Shakespeare to the front, respecting the great dramatist in the most laudable manner. There is little new and little missing in the story, and our old Windsor friends, as jovial and merry as ever, are with us, even in their quaint, fanciful Italian language. There is the jovial, noisy, conceited, amorous Sir John; the villainous, time-serving Bardolph and Pistol; the upright, but jealous Ford; the fussy Dr. Caius; the sentimental Fenton; the truly sweet Anne Page; and last, but not least, the gay, joke-loving, "merry wives," Mistress Ford and Mistress Page.

In all there are three acts, opening with the interior of the Garter Inn, and closing with the midnight revelry at Herne's Oak,

the belabouring of Falstaff, etc. Did we state that the music is fully worthy of Shakespeare's comedy, that would express the matter in a few words, yet something more needs to be told of a work that may be cited as a companion opera to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. *Falstaff* is an astounding *tour de force*, reflecting alike the artistic versatility of the librettist, and the consummate, matured powers of the composer. On this point the critics—and it might be added, the musicians—of all nations are agreed. The Shakespearean spirit has been caught by the composer in wonderful fashion, and the English flavour is found and preserved throughout the opera to an unmistakable degree.

One who was present on the eventful night of its first performance wrote :—

"Even setting aside the Milanese themselves, it would be impossible to conceive an audience more representative of the best elements in music, art, politics, and society. Critics were there from all parts of Europe—indeed, one might almost say from all parts of the world. The Italian Royal family were represented by the Duke of Aosta and Princess Letitia ; the Government by Signor Martini,

Minister of Public Instruction; the 'new school' in Italy by Signor Mascagni, to whom, as it was with Verdi himself, honour has come early; and society in general by MM. Leon Cavallo, Bazzini, Marchetti, Puccini, and a host of other notabilities. The ladies had done honour to the occasion, in characteristic fashion, by donning their most elaborate dresses, and thereby adding immeasurably to the bright and cheerful aspect of the house. The performance began amid absolute stillness, the more desirable as, like *Otello*, the new opera has neither overture nor prelude."

"This is the last work of my life," he said angrily, striding, a tall, gaunt figure, up and down his large drawing-room, and pushing back the long gray hair from his wrinkled forehead with an impatient gesture. "I am writing it for my own amusement; the public would have known nothing at all about it, had it not been for that *Mefistofole* of a Boito." This little joke of his own, more perfect in Italian than in English, put him into a good humour again, and on my asking him what his complaint was against his clever librettist, he told me the whole story. They had been dining at the Hotel Milan with Ricordi, the

music publisher, his wife, and one or two more. When dessert was on the table Ricordi, turning to Boito, inquired when his "*Nerone*," an opera for which the Italian public has been waiting for the last five years, would be ready. Boito replied that it had been laid aside in view of a work of much greater importance, and then rising, with his glass in his hand, looked towards Verdi and said, laughing, "Here's to your fat-paunched hero." Inquiries, of course, followed, and in this way the subject of the new opera became known. "I should not have forgiven Boito his indiscretion," Verdi continued, "had he not written me a first-rate libretto. The music that I have put to it is in some passages so droll, that it has often made me laugh while writing it."[1]

The artists entrusted with the first rendering of this *chef d'œuvre* were Signora Pasqua (Mrs. Quickly), Signorine Emma Zilli (Mrs. Ford), Virginia Guerrini (Mrs. Page), and Adelina Stehle ("Sweet Anne"); with Signori Garbin (Fenton), Pini-Corsi (Ford), Pellegalli-Rosetti (Bardolph), Arimondi (Pistol), Armandi (Caius), and M. Maurel (Falstaff).

[1] *The Daily Graphic*, 14th January 1893.

Signor Mascheroni conducted, and one after another the successive beauties of the work were poured forth amid a scene of excitement such as can only be witnessed in La Scala, and which was unprecedented even there. The interest of the audience was arrested from the first scene; but, as climax after climax was reached, the enthusiasm of the brilliant assemblage began to lose bounds, until, at the close of the opera, there was such a tumultuous applause, such calls for Verdi, as to be deafening. No fewer than thirty times was Verdi called on during the performance.

There was but one admission to make—Verdi, *doyen* of composers, past-grandmaster of music, had crowned his artistic career with the finest, the most scholarly work that ever issued from his pen. Little wonder that the people almost carried him back to his hotel, that they cried for him from the crowded streets, that they called him, time after time, to the balcony of his apartment in order that he might receive their acclamations.

King Humbert sent the eminent composer the following telegram:—"The Queen and myself, being unable to attend the first performance of *Falstaff*, anticipate the applause

about to greet this fresh proof of an inexhaustible genius, by sending you our best wishes and the expression of our great admiration. May you be preserved for many years to come, to the honour of art, to our affections, and to enjoy the recognition of Italy, which, even in her saddest days, found patriotic comfort in your triumphs."

From that day to this, interest in *Falstaff* has never ceased, the point most dwelt upon being the remarkable freshness, the youth and gaiety, the fun and frolic, on every page of the music. Could it be old-age work? or, was it that with his decline in physical powers Verdi's mental capacity was reaching greater perfection, suggesting perhaps the splendid spectacle of an after condition when, it is to be hoped for all of us, the mental portion of these sorry frames of ours will be doing its perfect work undeterred, unhampered.

Paris had the work at the Opéra Comique in April 1894, when the performance was rendered more interesting by the presence of the composer himself, who received a tribute of enthusiastic applause from a crowded house containing two thousand of the most notable representatives of the Parisian world. The

scene was a very striking one when Verdi, in his eighty-first year, yet carrying his age exceedingly well, was led forward between Victor Maurel and Mlle. Delna, the two principal interpreters of this version of the *Merry Wives of Windsor.*

In May 1894, *Falstaff* was given for the first time in London, at Covent Garden, with the Scala *troupe* of artists, the occasion furnishing the musical event of the season. The performance was witnessed by a brilliant audience, royalty being represented by the Prince of Wales, and the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg and her daughter, while the general gathering included nearly all the personages of "light and leading" in the London musical world. The comic masterpiece was a complete and unqualified success.

Signor Mancinelli conducted, and the principal *rôles* were filled by Signorine Kitzu (Meg), Giulia Ravogli (Dame Quickly), Olga Olghina (Nanetta), and Zilli (Alice); Signor Pessina represented an excellent fat knight (the part created by M. Maurel in Milan), and Signori Pellegalli-Rosetti, Arimondi, Armandi, and Pini-Corsi, were capital as Bardolph, Pistol, and Dr. Caius, and Ford,

respectively. The reception of the opera, from beginning to end, was most enthusiastic, and time after time the curtain descended amid tumultuous applause, and the calling forward of the singers.

Where a work is replete with splendid points and brilliant episodes—uniform in its excellence from opening to close—it is unnecessary to particularise one number more than another. Yet it is well to record the most "taking" pieces, even in a composition so consistently beautiful, both in libretto and in music, as *Falstaff* admittedly is. The first act opens in the interior of the Garter Inn, and amid the animated scene which follows, there is some excellent music to the doings of Bardolph, Pistol, and Dr. Caius. The canonic "Amen" is amusing, and Sir John's soliloquy upon "honour," gives the baritone a capital chance of displaying his powers. Another attractive number, where all is so attractive, is the chattering quartet of women, at the end of the first act. With the second act, we still are in the Garter hostelry—and the fun thickens. Mrs. Quickly and Ford, in turn, "interview" Falstaff, and here, as in the scene in Ford's house, and the search for

the missing knight, the music is of the liveliest, happiest character. The fat knight's solo, "When I was page to the Duke of Norfolk, slender of figure," the love duet, and Anne Page's song in the forest scene are further superlatively beautiful instances among many in this richly-gemmed work. The opera has been given in Milan, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and London — here several times, as recently as the last season—and whenever performed, the sparkling numbers enumerated are always encored, and re-demanded.

Critically regarded, the music is unquestionably the best that Verdi has written. Its leading features are its freshness, spontaneity, irresistible humour, and youthfulness; yet, its finished character, the carefully conceived and highly wrought detail, involving much technical skill and learning, bespeak unmistakably the ripened master-mind. What a reply, too, it is to all the early critical opposition which made out that there was nothing in Verdi beyond the power of adapting his countrymen's melodic commonplaces, and stringing them together suitably for a speedy oblivion!

"The age of miracles is supposed to be

past, but those who declare it so would do well to consider the miracle of Verdi's persistent artistic vitality. . . . When count is taken of the quality as well as of the quantity of Verdi's achievements, these must be confessed well-nigh miraculous. The list of his operas is an epitome, one might say, of the development of operatic music. Trace the steady march of his genius from the period of *I Lombardi* to *Otello*, remember the successive stages typified by *Trovatore*, *Ernani*, *Rigoletto*, *Aïda*, — each a masterpiece after its kind,—and you find yourself in the presence of a man who has never swerved from the search after the highest ideal. Between *I Lombardi* and *Otello* there is a gap which it might seem no one man could span. And yet, however different the methods of expression which Verdi has chosen in each stage of his development, the form has always been inevitable, and the man's personality is as apparent and as potent in one as in the other. *Aïda* seemed likely to be his last work; but with *Otello* came a new apocalypse. He had not been afraid to modify his method, that it might fit his subject more completely, and there was not wanting those

who (wrongly) saw in it a confession of conversion to the Wagnerian gospel. No one believed that the octogenarian composer would find anything fresh to say or any fresh way of saying it. The miracle has been repeated, for in *Falstaff*, produced at Milan on the 9th inst., we have a work which proclaims itself the expression of a phase of Verdi's nature quite unguessed at. The antiquaries of music, who care less to enjoy a work than to classify it, will not find the task in the case of *Falstaff* easy, for *Falstaff* does not fall readily into any of the required classes. It belongs to no school, not even to that of Verdi himself, for there was little in any of his other operas to show that he possessed the supreme gift of humour, though indeed we might have remembered that so exquisite a sense of proportion as his never goes unaccompanied with humour, and is dependent on it for perfection."[1]

Following this fulsome preamble is a highly flattering detailed account of Verdi's music to *Falstaff*—which stands in strange contrast to much that we have read of the *maestro* in the pages of the *Athenæum*. Such phrases

[1] *Athenæum*, 18th February 1893.

as the following, to be found in the notice, must indeed have proved balm to Verdi after his years of castigation at the hands of this journal:—

"Petulant contempt" (referring to the part where Falstaff harangues his servants on the point of honour) "is no easy thing to express in music, but here the difficulty is overcome without effort, and we are launched, so to say, on that sparkling sea of humour which has yet had but few successful navigators. The scene ends as Falstaff chases his chivalrous servants from the room. . . . Of the music it is enough to say that the *ensemble* of the nine voices is treated with consummate skill, and that the chattering quartet in E major for the women's voices, unaccompanied, is one of the most delightful passages in the whole score. . . . The great scene in which Falstaff is obliged to take refuge in the buck-basket is handled with immense skill by librettist and composer alike. Putting aside Wagner's treatment of the street scene in *Die Meistersinger*, there is nothing in comic music to be set beside the *ensemble* of this (second) act, in which Verdi has brought together with magnificent skill such incongruous elements

as the lovers behind the screen, etc. . . . In the music to this" (the last act) "the highest level is reached: poetry, grace, and humour are balanced and combined with marvellous delicacy. The whole scene is a triumph; in the matter of sheer beauty of form Mozart himself could not have surpassed it. . . . The charm that comes of absolute simplicity is the chief; and the presence of humour, now broadly laughing and now quaintly fantastic, need not be further insisted on. The manner is not less simple than the matter. There is nothing approaching the use of representative themes; and though no resource of the modern orchestra is left untried, the outlines of the music are as clear, its colouring as pure, as is a picture by Perugino.[1]

The score of Falstaff is something of an *alpha* and *omega* of a musical life—there is the young and the old, the youth and the philosopher present and apparent, in rare harmonious weaving. The symmetry of the whole is striking indeed; while the clever construction throughout shows not merely the educated, but also the painstaking composer.

[1] *Athenæum*, 18th February 1893.

All the music is not of such superlative grace as that delicious scene where the animated quartet of merry wives are reading Falstaff's love-letters; or the duet for Falstaff and Ford —the orchestration of which is so perfect, that even the merry jingling that accompanies Ford's rattling of the gold bag has not been missed. Such a standard of artistic excellence could not be maintained throughout any opera by any master; nevertheless, not a weak or unworthy number can be pointed to throughout the score. Even the penultimate *tableau* preceding the *fugue finale* of the opera — justly declared to be somewhat poor — suffers more than would otherwise be the case by comparison with the uniformly high order of the other music in the opera.

It is one of the most difficult tasks which even a master-musician can have set him to write comic music that shall be at once original and humorous. Yet, here Verdi succeeded at his first attempt. True, he has left *Falstaff*, and the style thereof, until the eve of his artistic career; yet, what a crowning work it stands! Lyric tragedy occupied the master's mind for nearly the whole of his long life, until it appeared almost that he could

write nothing else but lyric tragedy. Then to show that this was otherwise, he went to comedy — he composed one comic opera. What an example it is! Its proportions are colossal: its comedy is equal to Mozart; its *technique*, ingenuity, and construction rival Wagner. No grander piece of work could crown the master's career. Through Verdi, national opera as made in Italy stands to-day on as high ground as the lyric drama—the grand opera of France and Germany. England, unfortunately, cannot yet be considered in the matter.

CHAPTER IX

POLITICIAN AND CITIZEN

A born politician—Attempt to draw Verdi—The revolutionary ring of Verdi's music—Signor Basevi on this feature—National and political honours and distinctions—An inactive senator—England's neglect—The composer's nature and character—Bluntness of speech—A dissatisfied auditor—Verdi's alleged parsimony—Verdi and the curate—The gossips and his fortune—Life at St. Agata villa—An "eighty-two" word-portrait—Verdi's old-age vigour—Love of flowers—His hobby at the Genoa *palazzo*—Independence of character.

HAD Verdi not been a musician, he would probably have proved an ardent, daring politician. Italy would be loving and honouring him to-day for his political principles and *amor patriæ*, not less admiringly, not less fervently, than she now regards him for his vast harmonious gifts. As it was, he persistently declined to meddle with the tapes and wires of State matters. An attempt to draw Verdi politically was made in the spring of 1894, during the rehearsal of *Falstaff* in

Paris. One of the singers put out a "feeler." "Don't, for goodness' sake," he answered, "talk to me about politics. I have never paid any attention to them, and I am not likely to do so at my time of life; I have quite enough to do with my music." We have seen how his countrymen made him their political idol, and would assuredly have him know that they were looking to him as a deliverer from the Austrian yoke, even though he spoke through a medium that is usually resorted to for peaceful, rather than for revolutionary ends. The temper of his music was just to their liking, and Verdi took no pains to hide his sympathy with his countrymen under their yoke of foreign overlordship, albeit the success of opera after opera turned upon his peace with the authorities.

In the chorus, "*O mia patria, si bella e perduta*," chanted by Hebrew slaves in *I Lombardi*, the Milanese saw a reflection of their own wretchedness. Purposely did Verdi write ardent exciting melodies. They had power to, and did move the populace; and if at times they seem commonplace, and even vulgar, they were thoroughly suited to the singers, auditors, and conditions with which

he had to deal. Thus Verdi was an enlisted chief, an instrument, in the fortunes of the House of Savoy. *V E R D I* spelt the name of the composer. The capitals stood for the initials of "Victor Emmanuel, Ré d' Italia." How the impatient Lombardians seized hold of what seemed to them to be an inspired coincidence! Under cover of the name Verdi, avowedly their musical god, they could shout for Italian liberty and independence, right into the ears of Austrian spies and sentinels. "*Viva Verdi! Viva Verdi!*" from the mouths of the populace meant not only a tribute to the patriotic musician whom they idolised, but was another way of demanding Victor Emmanuel in lieu of the Archduke Francis. If the police interfered with the patriots, it was their beloved musician that had so moved them, and for whom they were shouting! "The streets," says a chronicler, referring to the time, "were filled with placards in white, red, and green, the Italian colours: VERDI in such big letters that nothing else was visible on the posters."[1]

Thus was Verdi, the musician and patriot, entwined inseparably round the hearts of his

[1] *Life of Verdi* (Roosevelt), p. 33.

countrymen, to the lasting advantage of both, at a time when Italy stood in great need of the support and succour of all her sons.

In the eyes of Verdi the national liberty was a thing to be accomplished, and if he did not shoulder the rifle in the struggles of 1859 and 1860, which, beginning with the freeing of Lombardy, ended in a free and united Italy, the clarion he sounded was so certain that no one would mistake its intent. Directly he began to sing, the inflammatory ring of his music arrested and stirred the Venetians. Rossini may well have dubbed Verdi "*le musicien qui a un casque*" (the musician with a helmet). The first signs were detected in *Nabucco*, then in *I Lombardi*,[1] and with *Ernani* there was a further outburst of the musical liberator's mind. The highest pitch of enthusiasm followed his ardent strains, and scarcely a performance of the *Ernani* went by without political demonstration. *Attila* fired a further desire for liberty. The feelings of the Venetians — still clamouring for inde-

[1] The chorus, "*O Signore dal tetto natio*," from *I Lombardi*, being sung in the streets of Venice and Milan, fomented the first demonstration against Austrian rule.

pendence—when they heard the air, "*Cara patria, già madre e regina*," knew no bounds, and for a while the performance could not proceed. At the verse, "*Avrai tu L' universo vesti L' Italia me!*" the whole audience, seized with frenzy, shouted with one voice, "*A noi!*" "*L' Italia a noi!*" Then when Palma, the Spanish tenor, sang his air, "*La patria tradita*," in *Macbeth*, the people were so reminded of the foreign despotism they were suffering from that they became uproarious, and the Austrian Grenadiers had to be called in. *La Battaglia di Legnano* was purposely pitched in an aggressive key. Signor Basevi has said—"From 1849 onwards, during ten years of national strife and protests, Verdi carried on politics in music, as we have all done in literature and humour. He carried on politics in music because, perhaps, without himself being conscious of it, he drew from the restlessness and tumult of his soul a kind of music which responded precisely to the restlessness and tumult of our minds; but when these tumults, these spasms burst forth, then he no longer sought for subjects of the present day to render extrinsic in action the sentiments which he had divined so marvellously when

they were shut up in the mind of the public for whom he wrote."[1]

Not alone were the eyes of Italy fixed upon Verdi. He was the recipient of honours and marks of esteem which were far from confined to his own land. As a member of the National Assembly of Parma, to which the citizens of Busseto elected him in 1859, he voted for the annexation of the duchy to Sardinia. The French nation made him Corresponding Member of the Académie des Beaux Arts in the same year. In 1861 Verdi was elected a Deputy of the Italian Parliament. Cavour wanted to see in the first national parliament the real blood and sinew of the country—the men who, as he said, "had helped to make Italy, whether in literature, art, or science." The composer hesitated, and at last yielded to the statesman's entreaty; but he only attended a meeting or two, for, as he said, he loved and preferred retirement to political excitement. In the year 1862 Verdi was decorated with the Grand Cross of the Russian Order of St. Stanislaus, of the Paris Académie des Beaux Arts, being head of the poll with twenty-three votes. His own country has honoured him.

[1] *Verdi* (Pougin—Matthew), p. 123.

Knowing how much Verdi had at heart the musical keeping of his country, the Italian Minister of Public Instruction, in 1871, selected him to visit Florence, to assume the post offered him for the improvement and reorganisation of the Italian Musical Institute. Then his sovereign recognised him. In 1872 he was created a Grand Officer of the Order of the Crown of Italy, and in the same year the Khedive of Egypt conferred on him the Order of Osmanie. The offer of the title of Marquis of Busseto was made to him after the production of *Falstaff*, but he declined it, preferring to remain plain Signor Verdi.

Following this recognition, Victor Emmanuel (by a decree dated 22nd November 1874) created him a Senator of the Italian Kingdom. The musician attended in due course to take the customary oath of office; but beyond this solitary occasion he attended no meeting of that solemn body. The honour was not a useless one, however, for one day an enterprising *entrepreneur* was found announcing *Aïda* as the work of Maestro *Senatore* Verdi, thinking evidently of his political as well as of his musical status. With the year 1875 further honours were

bestowed upon the illustrious composer. He was decorated with the Cross of Commander, and Star, of the Austrian Order of Franz Joseph; and, being already a member of the Legion of Honour, he was in May of this same year nominated a Commander of the Legion. The Italian Minister at Paris was charged to present him with the insignia of the Order, accompanied by a flattering letter from the Duke Decazes. Many and various other honours have fallen upon Verdi. When *Otello* was first performed in Paris, for instance, the President of the Republic (M. Casimir-Périer), before the beginning of the second act, invested the composer with the Grand Cordon of the Legion of Honour. Only England has done nothing. Good old insular England, that can distinguish and single out successful pickle-makers and milliners, but cannot find an honour to bestow on many a worthy and wondrous slave to Art and Science!

Many and many have been the less public attentions which Verdi has received at the hands of his fellow-countrymen. An early mark of recognition was the presentation by Prince Poniatowski of a gold laurel crown

each leaf of which was inscribed with the title of one of his works. This was upon the occasion of the performance of *Macbeth* at Florence. When *Aïda* was first performed, the artists presented the composer with an ivory sceptre ornamented with a star of diamonds; the title *Aïda* was set in rubies, whilst *Verdi*, worked in precious stones, stood out on a branch of laurel. A further memento fell to the composer when *Aïda* was given at the Paris Opéra. Delegates from the Italian colony waited upon the distinguished musician and handed him a crown of pure gold designed of laurel branches, the whole resting on a velvet cushioned stand, suitably inscribed. The Parisians placed a fine bust of the composer in the Grand Opéra *foyer*. It was by Danton, who had already made some capital out of the composer by caricaturing him at the keys of the piano, with a lion's mane and claws.

We venture the opinion that no better presentment of the famous composer's features than the full-length portrait at the opening of this volume has ever been given to English people. It is thoroughly characteristic of the man to-day. His face is fairly familiar to

most of us. We all remember his thoughtful countenance and well-shaped head, with its finely-chiselled features, and dark eyes full of the fire of genius, the whole set off with a liberal gift of hair on the head and face. The slender build and highly-strung temperament at once arrest the eye; nor can we fail to be attracted by the tidily-attired exterior of the master. Verdi is best seen under the ordeal of some operatic triumph. Then through all the excitement he remains what he is—a quiet, calm, modest gentleman, one of those intellectual giants who scorn to trade upon their greatness.

Verdi is a man of deep human sympathy. The loss of his first wife and his children shrouded him in a sad mood, which he cannot throw off, and the peculiarly gloomy and tragic nature of many of his operas has been attributed to his domestic afflictions. Again, when the great poet and distinguished author of *I Promessi Sposi* died, Verdi was quite overcome. Only when he had poured forth his *Requiem* to his dead friend's honoured memory, did he feel that his tribute of affection towards Manzoni had been at all adequately made. Verdi's goodness of heart

is seen in his treatment of his favourite librettist Francesco Piave, when dire misfortune befell him. The man who had written the libretti of *I Due Foscari*, *Macbeth*, *Il Corsaro*, *Stiffelio*, *Rigoletto*, *Traviata*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and *La Forza del Destino*, was one day discovered unhinged in body and mind, unfit for every place save the lunatic asylum. Finding his patient poet thus afflicted, Verdi settled a pension on him for life, and quieted the poor fellow's mind by undertaking the charge of an only child and providing for her welfare. Nothing weak marks Verdi's character; on the contrary, he, like most good musicians, has a firm will, rather prone at times to be susceptible and suspicious. One day, during the rehearsal of *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* in Paris, the *maestro* received a slight from the members of the orchestra, who did not relish the pains which Verdi was taking to secure his points. Upon explaining to the *chef d'orchestre*, the next attempt was a plain annoyance; whereupon the master seized his hat, and did not appear again at the theatre! Stories of his bluntness of speech are plentiful. At a rehearsal of *Falstaff* at Milan, the singers and musicians

gave him an ovation when he entered the Opera-house. In response he said, "I thank you all; but will thank you more if you do better in your performance than last time." When *La Traviata* was a failure at Venice, Varesi, the baritone, and other interpreters of the work, thinking to console Verdi, paid him their condolences; but he only exclaimed, "Make them to yourself and your companions, who have not grasped my music." Withal, the master can enter into the spirit of a joke. When the *Aïda* was produced at Milan in 1872, a certain person named Bertoni went from a neighbouring village to hear it; his outing, including supper, cost him fifteen francs ninety centimes. He happened not to like the opera. However, the next day, on finding it praised on all sides, he resolved to give it another trial. Accordingly, when it was again performed, he went for a second time to hear it, spent twenty francs, and was more dissatisfied than ever. Full of anger, he wrote to Verdi, telling him that the opera was a failure, doomed to early oblivion, and asking for the return of thirty-five francs ninety centimes, which sum, he alleged, he had wasted on going to hear it!

Verdi was not offended. He sided with the aggrieved one. Taking a pen in hand, he authorised his publisher to send Signor Bertoni thirty-one francs fifty centimes, adding, "It is not quite as much as the gentleman demands, but I think he could have had his supper at home!" The composer made the stipulation, too, that the melomaniac should not again attend the representations of the composer's works at his expense, except upon his written order. Quite natural too!

He has a great love for his fellow-men, especially the poor people. Thus he often creates work on his estate in the shape of quite unnecessary alterations and buildings, chiefly to give occupation to the poor people. One day the inevitable organ-grinder struck up the strains of *Il Trovatore* within hearing of his studio. Carducci, the Tennyson of Italy, was with him, and seemed irritated. "How do you like it?" said he. "Let him go on—it pleases me; and besides, we must all live somehow," was the reply.

Verdi has been charged with being mean, but the above anecdotes do not tell against him; nor indeed does his long and unbroken association with his music publishers (the

famous house of Ricordi) show that Verdi has been asking impossible prices for his works. Naturally he fixes his figure with his publisher; but with a bargain once struck the matter ends. As a point of fact the *maestro* is a very benevolent man, who often sends gifts of money anonymously to those in distress and poverty. But he has a great dislike to his gifts being made public.

Numerous philanthropic works, and in particular the hospital at Busseto, owe their existence to Verdi. Thereof an anecdote is told. The hospital is directed by the Mayor of the Commune. One day he went to Verdi to complain of the curate, who, as chaplain of the hospital, took advantage of his position to meddle with all the affairs of the administration. The curate was of a certain age, and very despotic; and the Mayor, in order to get rid of him, asked Verdi what he should do. The *maestro* grew tired of the long details produced by the Mayor in support of his complaint, suddenly cut him short, and said, "The curate is charged with the confession of the patients, and their burial when they die. If he interferes with anything else, *kick him out of doors.*"

All'Egregio Signor Crowest

Giulio Ricordi

The gossips have been busy with the disposition of Verdi's supposed enormous fortune. The following is a sample of many tales that have been the round of the European press: "Verdi is credited with the intention of doing something both handsome and original with the fortune which he has accumulated during his lifetime. . . . Verdi has no son, and he does not recognise any obligation to enrich any distant relations that he may possess. He therefore directs that the ten million lire which he will leave behind him shall be employed in making happy those who helped him to earn them — namely, musicians and lyric artists. A magnificent palace is to be built in his grounds, and this is to form the home of any Italian musicians and singers who may find themselves in straitened circumstances at the close of their career."

In the summer of 1849 Verdi bought the villa St. Agata, some two miles from Busseto, which ever since has remained his favourite residence. The house is well off the high road, concealed from view by large trees and shrubs—a condition which probably favoured the operations of the "crack and jemmy knights," who a year or two back succeeded

in burglariously disturbing the peaceful harmony of the composer's home. Adjoining are all the appurtenances of a country gentleman's estate. Some years after the loss of his first wife and children Verdi married Madame Strepponi, who happily is to-day spared to the master. Most of the year is passed at St. Agata, the winter months being spent at Genoa, where the climate is more genial.

Certain reports have credited Verdi with living the life of a recluse, whose only companions are two enormous Pyrenean hounds, while days are said to be spent by the master in his studio, which is shut off from the castle, and from which room Verdi is credited with emerging only for the purpose of obtaining sleep. No one, the wild reports went, was admitted save those who came by special invitation; so that often a distinguished personage would make his way to the guarded stronghold only to be met by the information that there was no admission. Naturally shy and reserved, Verdi has ever studiously avoided the public stare, and repeatedly, when he has been petitioned to visit this or that town, he has firmly but respectfully declined,

especially when he has foreseen that no purpose was to be served beyond that of honour to himself. The artistic temperament, especially in a great musician, differs from that of the city man and merchant, and precludes him from living ostentatiously, often vulgarly, or keeping so-called open house. All his close artist acquaintances, and many a musical stranger, have been visitors or guests at either the luxurious villa St. Agata or the Genoa Palazzo Doria, and there are many living who could testify to the charm and hospitality of the composer at home.

One of the best word-portraits of Verdi was drawn by the Paris correspondent of *The Globe* in 1894, at the time when the *maestro* was presiding over the rehearsals of his *Otello*, which was to be produced at the Grand Opéra :—"Verdi, in spite of his great age," the sketch ran—"he is now close on eighty-two —has preserved, both as a man and as a composer, the ardour and warmth of his youth. He is reproached with being short-tempered, and even violent ; thus it is that, in spite of his well-known kindness, it is not always easy to get on with him. He wears his white hair and beard long. His features are a little hard,

but remarkably intelligent. His customary attitude is that of meditation. He walks with his head bent down, and with long and measured steps. Few persons have seen him smile, much less laugh. It is said he has never been able to console himself for the loss of his two sons (son and daughter), who died in the same year as their mother. Neither fortune nor glory has sufficed to make him forget his terrible bereavements."

The secret of Verdi's wonderfully maintained vitality is the old *mens sana in corpore sano* principle. He is an early riser, and after his cup of black coffee, the early morning finds him about his garden or farm. Flowers form his favourite hobby. Behind the old *palazzo* at Genoa is a terrace with a large garden, beyond which may be seen the fine expanse of the Gulf of Genoa. This garden is Verdi's care; but that the attentions of its gardener are often unequal to the energy of Nature may easily be discerned. Sometimes the lines of pots of camellias and geraniums on the terrace present rather a dried-up and neglected appearance. But no one must meddle with them. It is Verdi's special duty to tend and water these, although they are

evidently often disregarded. No one dare tamper with these flowers, and if a visitor appropriates a blossom unasked, it annoys Verdi considerably. Yet never is the musician prouder, or more the grand man, than when presenting any particular visitor with one of his horticultural specimens. He rides almost daily, and composes a little each day. Then he lives sparingly, and is most abstemious, taking, after the Italian fashion, more cheese and eggs than meat. Verdi cares little for music in his home, and seldom visits the opera save for business purposes. "At St. Agata," he wrote to Filippi, the Italian critic, "we neither make nor talk about music; you will run the risk of finding a piano not only out of tune, but very likely without strings." To talk "shop" in Verdi's hearing is objectionable to him, and no act of indiscretion could be greater than the one of begging a musical question or discussion. His chief indoor amusement is a game of cards or billiards with his wife and relations. All reading he leaves until the evening, and this partakes mostly of poetry and philosophy.

All through life Verdi has been a God-fearing man. Pandering to nobody, he has

maintained a perfectly independent, straightforward method. Nor has he countenanced any but honest dealings; while to place himself in the hands of his artists, great or small, has been quite beyond him. He has demanded only the best efforts of his workers. Thus on the eve of the production of *Aïda* he wrote to a friend: "I wish nothing more than a good, and, above all, intelligent vocal and instrumental execution and *mise en scène*. As to the rest, *à la grace de Dieu;* for thus I began, and thus I wish to finish my career."

CHAPTER X

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF STYLE

Verdi's popularity—An important personality in music—Most successful composer of the nineteenth century—Verdi's opportuneness — Keynote of future struck in *Nabucco*—Its characteristics — Distinguishing features of Verdi's music — Stereotyped pattern operas — Change of style imminent in *Luisa Miller*—Altered second period style of *Rigoletto* — This maintained in *Il Trovatore* — *La Traviata* forebodings—Basevi's charge of an altered style therein—*La Traviata* and *débûtantes*—True Verdi style in *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*—*Simon Boccanegra* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*—Third period works—*Aïda*—Alleged Wagner influence—Mistaken criticism—Orchestration of *Otello*—Its style and *technique* compared with *Aïda*—*Falstaff*—Its position as an opera—A saviour of Italian art—The *Illustrated London News* defends Verdi from early critics—Later critics silenced—Verdi vindicated.

THERE is no need to ask "Who is Verdi?" He is that Italian master who has put a girdle of melody literally round the world. Not to the accomplished musician, the cultured amateur, the plodding student, and the happy home musical circle is he known only, but, to take England alone, he is familiar by name

and tune to thousands of the poorest and lowest, whose only music is the street organ, and whose main musical literature is the opera-house announcements on the theatre doors and public hoardings. Men and women who cannot pronounce the name of Mendelssohn articulate Verdi, and outcasts and arabs, whose opera-house is the wide, wide metropolis, and whose only orchestra is engined by the Saffron Hill fraternity, have the Italian *maestro*, in name and tune, at their tongue-tips. All this may not be art, but it is magnificent.

Verdi becomes a great art-study. He stands distinctly an epoch-making musician. A composer who in 1845 had not been heard in England, and who at the present time commands the lyric stage of this and every European country, to say nothing of other continents, furnishes necessarily solid ground for critical musical inquiry. His artistic career is most instructive in its steady growth to mature ripeness. His efforts, too, have been almost entirely confined to opera, and if we examine Verdi's operas from first to last, it will not be difficult to trace the change that has taken place in the fashion of opera during

the past three-quarters of a century. This has been as progressive as it has been emphatic, and no composer's works reflect it so decidedly as do Verdi's. The man and the musician went on in company. As he matured, so his art-work ripened. The three periods of his artistic career furnish a history of nineteenth-century operatic fashion and style.

While the most popular musician of the nineteenth century, he is, of all Italy's famous exponents of dramatic-musical art, indisputably the greatest. The land of song has produced many notable musicians, many wondrous melodists; but not one of them, not even Rossini, has so modified and influenced the national art as has Verdi. The entire extent of his impress will only be fully known when the Italians come to write their country's musical history. Verdi will be found to be the master who made Italian opera a grand national art-form, something of a social requirement in this closing nineteenth century.

To win a reputation such as belongs to Verdi, even if some discover it to be ephemeral only, is, indeed, a great achievement. Other pre-eminent musicians have laboured in every branch of their art—sacred and secular, vocal

and instrumental, oratorio and opera, symphony and quartet, song and dance—with all which some of them have hardly become known during their lifetimes outside the range of their own country. There seems to be a profound musical problem here, but the solution is at hand. The greatest of the great composers were each and all before their time. Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Schumann came in an age that was all unprepared for them. Verdi, on the other hand, whose phenomenal success is unlike theirs, was born at the moment. The musical world was waiting with open arms for him; for it had been satiated with opera music of a meretricious order, though written by his own countrymen, from which any deliverance could not fail to be a relief. The rescuer proved eventually to be Verdi.

Certain critics seem assured that Verdi copied, imitated, and transferred Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, and other composers. If this be true, then, in a sense, they stand indebted to him; for Verdi is the best-heard Italian composer to-day. Verdi, however, was something more than a musical *chef*, with the knack of serving up the *rechauffés* of brother musicians.

The public, apt to be blamed for the majority of its judgments, made no mistake concerning *Nabucco.* Verdi's countrymen were "lifted along" by the magic music, and, from *Nabucco* to *Falstaff*—an unparalleled instance of consistent artistic unfolding—this distinct power of the master's has acted similarly upon thousands who have flocked to hear the Verdi operas. Their passion, fire, and strong dramatic character have proved irresistible.

The Milanese had heard Rossini, Mercadante, and Bellini to the full; of the melodious phrases of Donizetti they were already tiring, when, suddenly, a musician with rare force and passionate melodiousness came upon them. Donizetti, mainly through his melodic prolificness, had brought Italian grand opera to a level of triviality and mediocrity; Verdi, with his depth of feeling and breadth of melody, promised an exactly opposite musical manner. The public, ever ready for some new thing, seized hold, willing to stand by him only as long as he could stir and amuse them. This he has ever been able to do.

The natural qualities which characterise Verdi's music so decidedly, stamped his first

work, as they mark his latest. The underlying secret of it all is furnished in the word *Advance*. It is not only Verdi's superior, or particular melody and harmony which operate; it is the common-sense, up-to-date way in which the composer has always regarded his subject. By intuition, he took a greater and a deeper view of Italian opera than any of his predecessors, and he went on advancing with the times. His countrymen had melody mainly at their pen-tips. Verdi used this and much more, and, while Wagner, for example, came along "great guns" with his German national opera, Verdi was proceeding to show that Italian grand opera could be brought to equal importance, musically and materially. Verdi, in his first work, unquestionably gave the lovers of opera something more than they had ever had before. That "something" was below the surface, and did not affect the outward forms so much as the hidden soul of the music. It was, however, discernible enough. In this direction mainly did Verdi's early operas differ from other Italian dramatic musical compositions. His later works, dating from *Aïda*, are illustrations of the new Italian national operatic art-form, which can never

be surpassed, and will rarely be approached in Italy.

I Due Foscari, a colourless, tame work which followed *Nabucco*, did not enhance its composer's reputation. Of all Verdi's operas, it would be difficult to find one showing fewer traces of his undoubted steady development of style than this. *Giovanna d'Arco*, *Alzira*, *Attila*, *Macbeth*, *I Masnadieri*, *Il Corsari*, *La Battaglia di Legnano*, were all on the accepted Italian lines of Bellini and his predecessors; but in *Luisa Miller* there came a decided and suggestive advance. There was a greater heightening of the dramatic interest, while many of the vocal and instrumental combinations had never been equalled in Italian opera. Certainly, Verdi was already doing more than perpetuating the accepted Bellini-Donizetti method. It was yet early to give the world an *Aïda*; but Verdi, we shall believe, was feeling his way towards a more perfect Italian opera-form. What did the country's opera lack that was so distinctly a born quality in him? Dramatic fire, continuity, oneness of conception,—a whole, instead of a piecemeal dramatic-musical composition. The first strivings after this—a perfection that

has been so undoubtedly attained in Verdi's most advanced operas — were apparent in *Luisa Miller.*

Therein the choruses are exceedingly attractive with their striking contrasts, while the brilliancy of, say the *bravura*, "*Lo vedi,*" and the pathos and fire of other solos and concerted pieces, combine to produce a truly fine opera. Verdi has also so developed the situations and heightened the interest, that a climax of overwhelming effect is reached in the last act. The orchestration is replete with richness and variety. The whole style of *Luisa Miller* is musician-like to a degree, despite occasional reflections of his own and other men's compositions. The alleged defect of *Luisa Miller* was a lack of melody. None of the fervour and force that were heralded in *Nabucco* were wanting, but the composer's melodic vein appeared to be drying up! So thought the critics. Not quite! Verdi was contemplating greater things, and in a while was to step into a new plane of creative musical art. His first opera had been unrestrained melodic settings—after the Italian fashion—of morbid and gloomy stories. He was to curb all this; and what in *Luisa Miller*

were merely indications of this change became realities in *Rigoletto.*

In a critical examination into Verdi's artistic development, *Rigoletto* occupies an important place. In it the composer, throwing off his early First style, adopts a less popular mould, which, while new in the history of Italian operatic art, was more characteristic of himself. As it has been well put—"Verdi is the rough, fiery composer no longer. Charm and grace are more to him now than mere noise and hubbub. In *Rigoletto* and *Trovatore* he gets rid of all that. Consequently we, who have often blamed him, have now only praise to bestow upon him —a change that he himself has brought about, and on which we congratulate him sincerely."[1]

This criticism describes exactly the situation. Not only was melodic exuberance stemmed in *Rigoletto* for a mixture of tune and recitative or *musica parlante*, but the orchestration had met a chastening process. While vocally the score was adjudged poor in melody and entirely deficient in *pezzi concertanti*, the orchestration was decidedly less

[1] *Gazette Musicale*, 25th January 1857.

noisy—its general character being uniformly calm and tranquil.

The *Trovatore* music is an excellent embodiment of Verdi's Second period style. It is less studied and more spontaneous than *Rigoletto*, but it sustains the advance in style. Uninviting as the libretto was, it had striking situations, with its black story and its gross improbabilities, which afforded Verdi scope for passionate expression and effect in more than one vivid scene. It found the people's favour immediately, and continues to hold audiences, despite the dinning suggestions that it is "not popular," "is dying out," and should be "placed on the retired list."

Though the public stamped *Il Trovatore* with the *imprimatur* of its approval, it did not altogether please the critics. There has ever been an endeavour to depreciate the opera, probably because so vast a success was gained by such simple means. Thus it has been described as "from beginning to end a direct plagiarism of Beethoven,"[1] as if such a charge could be sustained either to the discredit of Verdi, or to the credit of the

[1] *Musical Recollections of the Last Half-Century*, vol. ii. p. 281.

Bonn master. Notwithstanding censorship, the work has proved one of those few operas that have been "the rage" all over Europe, and we repeat it still possesses the power to charm and attract large, if not fashionable, audiences. Yet, what a span divides it from *Otello!* No two of the master's works show his change and development of style more distinctly than these operas. To say nothing about conception and construction, the vocal and instrumental music in one and the other is as removed as a storm is from the rippling of a rivulet. The two works have to be heard in the same week—as they were at Covent Garden during the 1895 season with the hidden orchestra—to realise and appreciate rightly, the mighty step (especially in the instrumental department) between the two operas. *La Traviata* foreshadowed something of what was to be accomplished in *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*. There was the familiar appeal to the popular ear, through that never-failing and ever-welcome channel —melody; and the construction was similar to the *Trovatore;* the treatment orchestrally and vocally, if curtailed and controlled, being much after the old Verdinian manner. There

was undoubtedly a lessening of excessiveness, due more to the melancholy nature of the book probably, than to a striving for a fresh style.

Basevi, the Italian critic, has thus written of *La Traviata:* "It is a composition which, by the quality of the characters, by the nature of its sentiment, by the want of spectacle, bears semblance to a comedy. Verdi has discovered a third manner, which in several points resembles the French method of the Opéra Comique. This style of music, although it has not been tried on the stage in Italy, is, however, not unknown in private circles. In these latter years, we have seen Luigi Gordigiani and Fabio Campana making themselves known principally in this style of music, called *da camera.* Verdi with his *Traviata* has transported this chamber-music on to the stage, and with happy success, to which the subject he has chosen well lends itself. We meet with more simplicity in this work than in the others of the same composer, especially as regards the orchestra, where the quartet of stringed instruments is almost always predominant; the *parlanti* occupy a greater part of the score; we meet with

several of those airs which repeat under the form of verses; and, finally, the principal vocal subjects are, for the most part, developed in short binary and tertiary movements, and have not in general the extension which the Italian style demands."[1]

That the music indicates another and Third style in Verdi's musical manner we prefer to forget; such a classification would need to rest upon this single score, and would involve us in a Fourth style, if we wished to classify the operas of the composer's closing years. Three periods in which to locate Verdi's art-progress and work are quite sufficient. Wagner was yet not influencing Verdi! No one will doubt that its music gave the opera its permanent position. Not only the nervous *débutante*, but every *prima donna* has seen in the character of *Violetta* a *rôle* admitting of the finest touches and varied emotions which a leading lady can be called upon to express in the exercise of her art. From the day when Piccolomini roused the excited *habitués* of Mr. Lumley's house to a fever enthusiasm, a long list of singers—including a Patti, Nilsson, and Albani—have studied and played the part

[1] *Verdi* (Pougin—Matthew), p. 154.

with varying advantage and delight, and whatever the verdict has been, the grace and charm of the music has always commanded the admiration of opera-singers, whether *soli* or chorus. And vocalists are as a rule better judges than are reporters and critics of what music should be.

Notwithstanding criticisms, good, bad, and indifferent, the fact remains that *La Traviata*, like *Il Trovatore*, is still with us; and although we have long been warned that it is "declining in popularity, like other operas of its period,"[1] it defers its final departure! Why does the music continue to please the public?—the uneducated section let us say. How is it that the cantatrice and queen of song loves the part still? The answer is found in the natural and graceful character of Verdi's music, and in nothing else. To us it has always seemed a more original and satisfactory opera than *Il Trovatore*. More equal throughout in quality, it contains some of the most touching natural music that has ever been heard from the opera stage.

Spontaneous beauty and brilliant period were not wanting in *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*, or

[1] *Athenæum*, 7th June 1880.

in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, albeit the mastermind appears disturbed. No Italian opera music could be more thoroughly Verdi's than the numbers, "*Giorno di Pianto*," a reflection of the *Donna è mobile* canzone, and "*Ma se m' e forza perderti*" romanza in *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* and *Un Ballo in Maschera* respectively.

As has been already suggested, in *La Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos* came unmistakable traces of a change in Verdi's manner. Although in these operas his habit of portraying human passions at their strongest pitch—in their noblest and sometimes their basest moods—still remains, Verdi's mature or Third period works embody to the fullest extent all that was generating in his mind nine years previously. *Aïda* in form and conception is clearly based upon *La Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos*. Strikingly successful as the master has been with his First and Second period operas, they were not productions that reflected the fullest power of the high-minded musician. Profitable financially they had indeed proved to their composer; but they did not take Italian art one great step onwards. Verdi was keenly

sensible of this. The desire to achieve something that would really advance his country's art taking possession of him, therefore, and what was more, finding grand, speedy expression at a time of life when most successful men seek repose—all this was, indeed, most admirable and artist-like.

The instant *Aïda* appeared, critics discovered much that was novel in its style. It was a combination of old and new—the accepted Italian opera mixed up with the best and latest in French and German Grand opera. No one expected it of Verdi, yet here it was before the world's eyes. On its production, doubts were freely expressed concerning its permanent qualities. "It is easy to see that the work will never achieve the lasting success of *Rigoletto*, the *Trovatore*, and the *Traviata*," wrote one critic. Another said, "Except as a spectacle, that it will be preferred by Verdi's old admirers to some of his earlier and less pretentious works, or that it will gain for him new disciples, we cannot think is in any high degree probable." Unhappily for these predictions, the work saw something like a hundred representations in Paris within the next three or four years!

A score of years and more have now passed, and yet *Aïda* draws crowded Royal Italian opera audiences, from which we conclude that the work has always possessed real musical merit—merit which the critics, as a body, first failed to recognise and acknowledge. The splendid opera also, has proved one of a triad which have raised Verdi considerably in the estimation of every right-minded musician. Before *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*, he was dubbed by critics the "sanguinary Italian melodist," the "morbid imitator of Meyerbeer," the "sensational, commonplace composer," with other similarly inelegant, inaccurate, and offensive epithets. Those who have lived long enough, however, have discovered something more than the musical blackleg in Verdi.

The opera of modern times must possess merit as a drama; it does not suffice for it to be but a peg, hanging upon which is a series of pretty tunes. The old-fashioned plan of chopping up each act into a series of recitatives, airs, duets, etc., is now discarded in favour of more musical declamation. In the new opera there are less frequent repetitions of the words, and consequently the dramatic

action gains in continuity. The orchestra too plays a more exalted part, being resorted to not only to accompany and illustrate the text, but to provide a general local colour throughout. All this Verdi supplied in *Aïda*, and the cry at once raised was that he had been Wagner-hunting. Critics in the musical profession and out of it—critics who know a little about music, and a considerably larger number who knew nothing of the art—declared that Italy had at last gone over to the German musical method. But thirty years previously we were told that "Signor Verdi's *forte* is declamatory music of the highest passion"; also that "the composer's music becomes almost intolerable, owing to his immoderate employment of brass instruments." Undoubtedly in *Aïda* the master adopts a deeper and more dramatic character than had been usually shown by Italian masters; but he could have as easily done this had Wagner never lived. The ambition of a master-mind like Verdi's would be to raise his country's art to the level of other countries; and the crowning life-work of Verdi has been to place Italian opera on a higher plane, and to furnish an example of Italian national opera that

would compare with that of France and Germany. To accomplish this the Bellini-Donizetti type of opera needed to be newly planned, orchestrated, and shaped into a far more comprehensive homogeneous whole. It was all this that *Aïda* pretended to meet; and it, *Otello*, and *Falstaff* have left their composer's mind thoroughly at ease probably concerning the place of Italy in dramatic music for the future. Certainly they should have done.

In composing *Aïda* Verdi had something more in view than pleasing the ears of the Khedive and his Egyptians. He had before him the operatic universe; and it was to arouse this that he sat him down to write when almost a septuagenarian. To cut himself adrift from the conventionalities of Italian opera, and place before the public a grand and beautiful dramatic lyric work, comparable with any opera that had preceded it, was indeed a great proceeding. With its modern characteristics the first alarm raised by musical public and critics alike was Wagner; but after many years' experience and trial of the work it is discovered that there is very little, if any, Wagner device or manner in it!

In the nineteen numbers of which the opera consists there is much that is musically novel and beautiful. The descriptive music, especially when removed from the tragic parts of the work, shows the composer in his happiest mood. The emotional (even sensational) nature of the music too is very marked, and this is where the master, retaining his country's manner, rises triumphantly over French and German dramatic music. The vocal music is thoroughly characteristic of Verdi. There are few solos, yet the charm of such pieces as "*Celeste Aïda*," "*L'insana parola*," and Aïda's romance, "*O cieli azzurri*," wherein she recalls the beauty of her own country, makes ample amends in quality for the absence of quantity. The duets, of which there are six, are not unusually striking, but the *finales* are exceedingly fine, and the effect of the ensemble is most imposing. The vocal and instrumental combinations are undoubtedly happy and effective.

It was the orchestration of *Aïda* mainly which led public and critics away concerning Verdi's supposed conversion to the Wagner or some other "ism." No sooner were heard the grand choral and orchestral combina-

tions in the finales of the work,—movements remarkable alike for their breadth, grandeur, and dramatic reality,—than it was bellowed forth that Verdi had been imitating Berlioz, and the host of modern manipulators of the orchestra. The ponderous instrumentation, some say too much so, carried all minds at once to Wagner, when, really, Verdi could still be Verdi if, exercising his privilege, he elected to blow his theatre down with brass. "The work," wrote a critic, "is very heavily scored, over-instrumented in the brass particularly, and it would exact double the number and twice the tone of the strings at Covent Garden to counterbalance the blatant effects,"[1]—from which we are to believe, we suppose, that in this opera the talented, experienced composer had taken leave of his senses! Quite an unlucky hit, coming as it did at a time when the musical world was only too ready to see in such criticism a hidden suggestion of Wagnerian influence. It was unfortunate, too, inasmuch as the charges of "over-instrumenting" and "undue declamation" were arraigned against Verdi as far back as 1846, when *Nabucco* was produced — long before

[1] *Athenæum*, 1st July 1876.

Wagner was heard of. "As we have had occasion to remark more than once,"[1] wrote the *Athenæum* critic, speaking of *Nino, i.e. Nabucco*, "its composer's music becomes almost intolerable, owing to his immoderate employment of brass instruments." Again, "Signor Verdi's *forte* is declamatory music of the highest passion."

Yet, thirty years afterwards, these very characteristics are traced to some recent French or German influence! Some few think otherwise. The *Aïda* subject, in its Eastern origin and character, calls for an excess of broad, semi-barbaric effects, as any one acquainted with oriental manners, life, and literature knows. Brass instruments convey this admirably, better than all the "string" and "wood" in the world. It is from this profuse employment of brass instruments, particularly the six genuine Egyptian trumpets used in the triumphal march of Radamès and his army, that the charge of imitating Wagner, or of becoming "Germanised," has probably arisen. But if the truth be told, this Verdi development has as much to do with Wagner as with Adam, the departures being a con-

[1] *Athenæum*, 7th March 1846.

sequence of the master's desire to write a thoroughly up-to-date national opera, which his talent and learning fully warranted him in doing. Both vocal and instrumental music aimed at that illustrative local colour which the book and situation needed; hence the lavish use of oriental scales, Persian songs, the dance of black boys, with all the resplendent paraphernalia of Eastern temple, pagoda, and palace.

With all its "new style," the effort to get away from old methods by the employment of theoretical devices, novel and extreme harmonies, abundant recitative, curtailed melody, magnificent finales, and unlimited stage resources, *Aïda* is still distinctly Verdinian. The solos are peculiarly in Verdi's vein, and frequently suggestions of *Trovatore* and other works crop up, while the entire opera abounds in dramatic, passionate expression peculiar to Verdi. All this is as it should be from the Verdinian point of view; but if the result of this laudable attempt to formulate a modern Italian opera must be to brand it with some guiding influence or subject-model, then, instead of making Wagner that power, it should be Meyerbeer. If Verdi has

followed any model at all, which we do not admit, it is the sumptuous richness and picturesque variety of the composer of *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète*, and *L'Africaine*. But Verdi wanted no model. At a distance of twenty years we can look back and discover that Verdi had something more in his mind when composing *Aïda* than the slavish imitation of this or that composer. He was about to crown his career with an opera, or more, of a style which many circumstances debarred him from attempting earlier.

All told, there is ample evidence in this first great work of Verdi's Third period to show that the composer is still wholly himself. That faculty, which was particularly Verdi's, of expressing extreme emotion, and of raising his audience to the highest pitches of sensational excitement, is present, notably in the finale of the second act. Then the composer's old command of melodious imagery and pathos, together with the expression of varied and conflicting passions, stamp the work from beginning to end—the love duet in the second act, between soprano and tenor, a romance in the third act, a soprano and contralto duet, a quartet and chorus, and all the music, from the

consecration of Radamès down to his victorious return with Aïda's captive father, being particularly Verdinian. Even the composer's supposed weaknesses are present in *Aïda*. The whole subject is melodramatic; the principal characters are killed, as usual; his alleged morbid preference for dismal dirge-music finds ample vent in the funeral of the lovers, and other tragic parts of the opera; from beginning to end can be heard melodic suggestions recalling the old familiar operas. All this, and page after page of imaginative, fancy tone-painting, *Aïda* contains, and yet we have been asked to believe that it is not Verdi!

The student of comparative musical science will see in *Otello* a further development of style. The composer confirms *Aïda*, and while further stultifying the detractory criticism passed on *Aïda*, furnishes ample proof of a marvellous vitality, and a freshness and originality, with depth of learning, which his greatest of admirers could scarcely have expected. Even with *Aïda* thrown in (as a sort of operatic abnormalism) many still regarded Verdi as the mere seductive, melodramatic Italian melodist; the profound musi-

cian never. *Otello* settled matters. The majesty, power, inspiration, and learning, the command of theoretical device, and orchestral *technique*, were overwhelming. Nobody expected it from Italy, still less from Verdi. Quite a surprise! Here was a work wherein all the lights and shades of human passion were depicted with a truthfulness and reality which no living musician could equal. The greatest of the world's poets and dramatists was set in a fashion to dispute which, or to disparage, would be useless. There could be no other conclusion, and whether performed in Italy, France, or in England, one opinion only has been possible as to the *Otello* music. This must be held to be a great triumph for the justly famed, though long abused, musician, especially when, as we contend, this perfected art-style is Verdi's own—the man's musical genius, characteristics, and great learning at their highest pitch, uninfluenced, unaffected (save in that legitimate manner which experience brings) by any foreign composer or school. The developed mind and man in Verdi's case gives us the splendid spectacle of the developed musician, particularly *en evidence* in *Otello*. If we delight to watch

the growth and ripening of Verdi's genius from *Oberto, Conte di S. Bonifacio*, to the *Missa di Requiem*, we can become still more interested in pondering over the *nuova maniera* which marked *Aïda*, a manner which is heightened in the *Otello* masterpiece, and accentuated in *Falstaff*.

Otello is a perfectly modern opera, thoroughly up-to-date in design, material, and construction. Of its four acts, the last is distinctly the most masterly; the second being a little inferior to the third. The initial act is marked with Verdi's matured manner less than either of the others. Though somewhat fragmentary in places, the opera holds together with perfect homogeneity, and it must be regarded as a wholly uninfluenced score, more so than *Aïda*. The "Love duet" and Iago's "Credo" are the only pieces in the opera that recall Wagner, and they have too much of the Verdi and the intensely Italian about them to be mistaken. No! *Otello* is an opera which only an Italian could write; a work which will always rank as a brilliant example of latest Italian grand-opera. In advanced thought and reasoning, together with depth of learning and exercise of the

declamatory branch of vocal art, it is somewhat superior to *Aïda*, but it is doubtful whether it will ever become as popular, because it lacks the glorious picturesqueness and inspiration of that grand work.

Had Verdi's career ended with *Otello* there would have been no difficulty in determining his place—a very forward one—in the world's history, and notably in the world of dramatic music. With the production of *Falstaff*, however, the wonderful vitality, resource, and inspiration of the giant mind broke out afresh, bewildering everybody concerning the art-possibilities that were still in store behind the more than octogenarian composer. It is the swan-song perhaps of the illustrious master, and a great song it indeed is. To think that such a score should be the easy pleasurable outcome of the brain of a man bordering upon his eightieth year was, at the time, one of the most extraordinary features in connection with the production of *Falstaff*, and the fact will ever stand amongst remarkable efforts in musical annals. *Il Trovatore* is a monument of melody, a standing example of what passionate tune can be and is as an element of art; *Otello* was an extraordinary development in

breadth of style and usage, vocal and instrumental; but *Falstaff* surpassed all. It sums up all that is best in Verdi's musical mind and method, and will ever serve as a standard of Italian national art, *nemine dissentiente.* It is the most brilliant, the most masterly, of all his operatic productions. Gorgeous in its wealth of invention and consummate skill, it places Verdi on his highest artistic pedestal. Like *Aïda* and *Otello* it is pre-eminently a musician's work, and shows the widened style of the composer, which used to be regarded as a Wagner imitation more than either of its predecessors. With all its delightful, unceasing humour the work does not appeal readily to the popular mind, the fact being that to understand and enjoy it the taste must be educated. Like Wagner's operas, *Falstaff* is a score that taxes the critical sense, and the more musical and highly cultivated the listener is, the more will Verdi's latest music command attention. Nor does this mean that the opera will not live. On the contrary, as musical knowledge becomes more and more spread, *Falstaff* and *Otello*, the advanced handiwork of Verdi, will prove to be music of a far more satisfactory nature than that

luxuriant passionate sort which abounds in *Trovatore*, *Traviata*, and other young Italy operas.

If the music of *Falstaff* proved a revelation to those who first heard it, it was also a revolution. Nobody had ever credited Verdi with the preponderating quality in this opera; it was Mozart come to life again! The humanity of the man who had ever depicted the morbid, treacherous, worst-passioned natures was suddenly reflected in the light-hearted, innocent frolic of youth, music as light and babbling as a child's speech. All that was so cheerful in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the fun of the *Barbiere di Siviglia*, with much of the Verdi characteristic, shot out in *Falstaff* in a way that simply electrified the musical world. The tragic, melodramatic Verdi was no more: in his place stood the exalted, the chastened master of art. No other composer had ever made such a change of front, a change that brought him on good terms with the whole musical world. *Falstaff* was indeed a new apocalypse. Perhaps the most striking feature of the *Falstaff* music after its jovialness is its consistent character—one of high quality and finely detailed workmanship. It is not

a case of sandwiching a good tune, dramatic chorus, or an overwhelming *ensemble*, between a mass of meagre indifferent writing, but from first to last the music is of a most elevated, high-pitched order—tune, harmony, scholarship, *ensemble*—these abound; but the whole is so well balanced and dexterously planned, as to make the opera a delightful study for the theatrical musician as well as for the careless listener. As has been well said, "*Falstaff* is not a mere string of pretty tunes, *ensembles*, and choruses of every-day pattern, but a colossal work, a mass of intricacy, such as musicians alone can dive into and comprehend whilst uncultivated listeners can yet find enchantment upon the surface. For to the cunning of a Wagner has here been allied the simplicity of a Mozart."

Undoubtedly *Falstaff* is the most remarkable example of the master's genius, and when we reflect that while it was being evolved there was a gaping world, with ears all open, waiting to learn how much of Wagner would resolve into Verdi, it becomes truly astonishing that its composer has steered so clear of any appreciable influence or model. It is the unaided work of the one master-hand.

Assuming that Verdi has anywhere imitated Wagner, then in *Falstaff* the Italian is certainly further removed from the German than in any other of his operas. There is hardly a recurring theme in the whole opera; and the everchanging, constantly varying tints of emotional expression, the brilliant *ensembles*, the ingeniously contrived pieces, where three and more rhythms are expressing chattering views and sentiments at one and the same time; beautiful solo pieces, duets, and notably an accompanied quartet—all these, and the highly dramatic and well-judged *finales*, have no more to do with Wagner, or any other composer save Verdi, than they have with Homer. As a whole, *Falstaff* is an astounding masterpiece. In form, construction, scholarship, and musicianly result, it is the finest opera Verdi, or any Italian, has written. Its vocal and instrumental play and device are such as were never thought to be in Verdi, and, like its two immediate predecessors, it places Verdi in the first rank of the world's operatic composers. *Falstaff* must ever be regarded as a wondrous specimen of humorous music, constructed upon perfectly legitimate and classical lines. No nobler work

could crown an artist's life-efforts; no other work shows so well the advanced and chastened style of Verdi's Third and matured period. *Falstaff*, as a creation, has immortalised Verdi. It has done more. *Finem respice!* It has saved artistic Italy in this *fin de siècle* age. This last work of Verdi's furnishes the culminating point in the history of Italian opera.

How then can the punishment which Verdi received at the hands of his first English musical critics be explained? How came it that a composer, who had lovingly placed many splendid tributes upon the high altar of his art, was so estimated, by at least one responsible critic, as to merit severe castigation of such a character as this:—

"Signor Verdi is the one prophet of Italian opera, and since this paragraph was penned, the waning of the coarse light of his star is pretty distinctly to be observed. It is hardly possible to imagine his violence outdone by any successors; yet this would seem to be the law of Italian movement in such shows of art as are to be popular."[1]

Thirty and forty years ago, music here

[1] *The National Music of the World:* Henry Fothergill Chorley, edited by Henry G. Hewlett (1880), p. 76.

was hardly deemed worthy of criticism in newspaper columns, albeit a journal here and there—the *Athenæum*, for instance—recognised the art. If, however, there were then few musical representatives of the English Press, the disadvantage appears to have been atoned for by the character of the criticisms. Some few of the musical scribes deigned to notice, and were deemed capable of considering, Verdi. These began, from the first, to hunt him *à outrance*, neither discerning nor expecting any good from the Italian. Never was there a more abused man than Verdi. If "best things are moulded out of faults," then to distinguish "faults" in such a musical renegade was out of the question. The whole was, according to certain critics, hopelessly unregenerate!

"Verdi's career in this country has been curiously chequered. If artistical anathemas could have annihilated his fame, then would he have long since ceased to have been heard of; but he appears to enjoy a cat-like vitality amongst our amateurs. Never was there one of his works produced, either at Her Majesty's Theatre or at the Royal Italian Opera, but he received a terrific castigation from criticisers,

and the musical public were assured, after these awful denunciations of indignant journalism at the performance of such 'unmitigated trash,' that the name of Verdi could be no more uttered in this musical metropolis. And yet the thus extinguished composer—on paper—the very next season was sure to be brought forward in the shape of a revival of one of his 'failures,' or in the representation of his latest continental novelty. What then is the key to this anomalous state of things, wherein it is found that Verdi's defenders, amongst writers, are so few, and his partisans still more rare, and still Verdi is not shelved? Is it that amongst opera frequenters there is a fiat in his favour, which is sufficiently strong to maintain his name in the repertory? Or is it that the general body of amateurs feel that the dead-set against the only composer left in Italy is based on prejudice, intolerance, and injustice?

"Whatever may be the solution of these questions, it is, at all events, satisfactory to find that the spirit of justice is sufficiently powerful amongst English audiences not to be carried away by mere clamour; and *Rigoletto*, the three-act lyric drama, put on the stage for

the first time on Saturday, with such magnificent resources, will secure an impartial hearing from those *connoisseurs* who are not led away by proper names only."[1]

Thus wrote one critic who possessed good sense and courage which enabled him to look calmly on, while the pen-and-ink slaughter raged fast and furious, for several years following Verdi's advent here. Coming from a journalist representing a leading, influential journal, the comment is, at least, suggestive.

As it bears, moreover, upon an interesting aspect of present-day journalism, it may, at this long removed period, well be reviewed, if only in justice to Verdi. That the composer long since vindicated himself there can be no doubt; but this does not do away with a present-day question of how far public criticism should influence those who read it, or to what extent hostile censorship has operated, or may

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 21st May 1853. Eight years previously the *Illustrated London News*' (5th July 1845) critic, while expatiating on operas of bygone composers which had been heard and reheard to satiety wrote thus of Verdi:—"A better state of things is, however, we trust, approaching. The appearance of a composer of so much originality of genius as Verdi, heralds, it may be hoped, that of a new and more ambitious school, whose masters will not be satisfied with tickling the ear and pleasing the fancy, but will seek for the more permanent and legitimate sources of effect."

do, to crush the artistic aims and possibilities of those for the encouragement of whom, and not for their annihilation, journalistic comment is supposed primarily to exist. Perspicuity should be the first law of criticism.

The writer of the above quoted remarks had in view, among others, such contemporary journals as the *Times* and *Athenæum*, which papers, especially the latter, had been particularly endowed, as it would appear, with the mission of "slating" Verdi, until there could be reached what in pugilistic parlance is known as a "knock out." Not for a moment do we doubt that all that was written and published had in view the possible interests of Art.

It is not difficult for us, living in these closing years of the Nineteenth Century, to assure posterity that the suggestion of an "ephemeral reputation" for *Il Trovatore* has been sadly belied; and Verdi has demonstrated in the broad light of day that neither Rossini nor Meyerbeer nor Auber accomplished for dramatic lyric art what he has done. "Mission" or no mission, "system" or no system, *Il Trovatore* has braved the battle of managerial cupidity for nearly half a century; it has replenished theatre coffers, and it still

"draws" crowds who enjoy listening to it. What more is wanted? If Music does these things, then, surely some of the first conditions of Art are fulfilled. The most modern of modern music can accomplish little more, unless it be to vex the mind with its abstruseness, and to tax the brain in divining the whereabouts of this or that theme, and the entry and passage of some particular "subject" phrase. This revelling in the region of theory, the perpetual expectation for progressions of fugal enterprise and cleverness, are well enough in their way, and provide admirable occupations for musical "cobwebs"; but is it a congenial employment for the rank and beauty of Society? If attendance at the opera is to involve some trying brain-study for the audience, the boxes and stalls must soon be empty. Music for the stage must ever be of a nature to give enjoyment; when it ceases to be this, and becomes a study—a something that even the πολλοί themselves cannot understand—then its existence is jeopardised.

What means the latter-day revival of *Il Trovatore*, *Rigoletto*, and other old familiar operatic acquaintances? Is it a reaction in

favour of the old at the cost of the new in art? Let it be borne in mind that the present is, for the most part, a new generation listening to and admiring Verdi's Second period strains. The audiences are not made up entirely of old fogeys in green spectacles and drab sparrow-tails, whose waning physical powers are overcome by emotional memories of the past. Is it true after all that the *Trovatore* music has long been declining, and is all but dead; that now and then a dramatic soprano, as Madame Titiens was, or a "lungs of brass" tenor, as Signor Tamagno is, can more or less galvanise the corpse into life? We think not. Our opinion is that there is real genius, true sterling worth, in the music of the *Trovatore*, which of itself—and not from any lack of taste, or culture, or of mental aberration on the part of the "mob" (for whom alone, we have been assured Verdi could cater)—has preserved this opera, and many others, in the hearts and ears of the public at large. Here and there the vocal and instrumental processes may seem, and probably are, uncouth; but that the music as a whole possesses undying properties, a life-current passing on to all who hear it, we have no doubt. Thus, although

the dictates of fashion may set aside the *Trovatore* for a while, there will always be the risk of its bounding out unexpectedly to take hold of the hearts of a new rising generation. If the *Trovatore* music had not been vital music from the first, it would not be here to-day, inasmuch as the work is one which has never been "written up" by the critics. The process has rather been to mount the tub and affect a superior taste, while poor, deluded, no-cult folk flocked to the opera-house to listen to hackneyed stuff, which we have been assured was not music at all! But the voice of the people—the *vox populi*—is not to be denied, even though critics wax warm.

Millions find tune in *Trovatore;* and tune (when of the quality of Verdi's) becomes the first, the unextinguishable principle of music. This is the grand secret of the vitality of *Trovatore* and operas akin to it, which the intelligent many will continue to enjoy to their heart's content, *malgré* the pityings of wiseheads. When *Trovatore* is as extinct as the dodo, and as dead as the door nail, that will be the time to sing its requiem, although there would seem to be little promise of any

of this generation being required to attend that solemn function. Pending the setting of the sombre seal, we, for our part, will continue to respect Verdi, and folk in general will not be far wrong if they take to believing that Verdi is as good a judge of music as were any, and all, of his defamatory critics.

Political circumstances had much to do with Verdi's jumping into popularity in Italy. Not so in England. No element of luck attended his *débût* here, where he stood not upon his merits. From the first he encountered a determined opposition. It has never been quite clear what this opposition wanted, but that it was supported by such a power as the late Mr. Chorley, for forty years the independent musical critic of the *Athenæum*, is sufficient evidence to prove that it was formidable. What did it mean?

Weber (1786-1826) and Meyerbeer (1791-1864) were of course known here. That romantic character pervading the German national opera had become familiar to English ears through Italianised versions of such supernatural subject operas as *Der Freischütz*, *Euryanthe*, and *Oberon;* whilst opera-goers were growing accustomed to the gorgeous

pageantry and dazzling resources of gigantic examples of operatic architecture like *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète*, and *L'Africaine*. Can a leopard change its spots? Surely the sapient critics were not expecting a transformed Italian opera model from an Italian at one bound? Verdi had been applauded in Italy for what he had accomplished on the continental lines of his country's opera. He was professing nothing more, and Mr. Lumley, when arranging for the composer's works for the English stage, contracted for naught else. As all the world knows, Verdi has accomplished immeasurably more since, in bringing Italian opera fully up to the level of the Weber, Meyerbeer, or Wagner model. The public is now prepared for Italian operas of the *Aïda* and *Falstaff* stamp, but it is doubtful if, fifty years ago, their production would not have brought forth a storm of disapproval. Verdi's earlier operas, *Ernani* and *Il Trovatore*, were fully worthy of the average taste of the times; and if it be maintained that they are going out of fashion, precisely the same thing can be said of several of the German and Franco-German operas which certain critics applauded while they abused Verdi,

and with which Verdi's works were compared and declared to be inferior.

Whatever prompted the resistance to Verdi (the strong feeling between the management of the rival opera houses may have had something to do with it), it is certain that Verdi encountered a determined and unfair opposition on coming to England. Equally certain is it that Mr. Chorley became a powerful mouthpiece of the opposition. With a freedom permitted to its talented staff that did infinite credit to the management of that leading journal of art and literature, the *Athenæum*, its pages were long allowed to be disfigured with anti-Verdi criticism such as it is now difficult to understand, unless it had for its object the immediate Germanising of Verdi by sheer force of censorship.

The musical drama is the most artistic manifestation which man can express. A successful grand opera demands all that is highest in music, drama, and a host of other phases of cultured training. This can only, save very exceptionally, be achieved towards the end, not at the beginning, of a lifetime; and the perspicuous critic should be able to foresee the prospects of this in a young com-

poser. Great as Mr. Chorley perhaps was as a musical censor, he did not forebode the successful future of Verdi any more than he encouraged Mendelssohn, his judgments upon whom have been long since overturned.

This chiefly, however, as a footnote to history. Verdi has outlived all opposition, and has risen to a great artistic eminence fully deserved in the case of one who has laboured so ably and so unremittingly in music. Now the critics on all sides fall down and worship him. He is beloved in England not less than in his own land, while all the world will long remember him by his *Requiem Mass* and latest operas, if not by such familiar lingering strains as "*La Donna e Mobile*," "*Ah si ben mio; coll essere io tuo*," "*Quando le sere al placido*," and scores of others.

De mortuis nil nisi bonum; and, having borne dearly-loved ones to Death's portals, Heaven forbid that we should ever speak ill of those that sleep. But, history must be written; and it is only sheer justice to Verdi to advance his side of the case. That Verdi, *ab initio*, down to the production of *Aïda* (when the composer was sixty-three years of age),

experienced a long spell of powerful English critical hostility is beyond doubt. Whether Italian opera had so obtained under Bellini, Donizetti, Mercadante, and Rossini that folks, or sections of society, were so surfeited with it as to positively refuse to tolerate more while Weber, Wagner, and Meyerbeer could be had, however promising that more might appear, or whether the great reputation that generally preceded the introduction of the Verdi scores put up the backs of the critics, are possibilities which might furnish some key to the solution of the problem which this opposition provides for us who are considering it to-day.

We may be told that, to early critics, Verdi's artistic career was a difficult one to judge, since it was so peculiarly progressive—unique, in the way in which it gradually led up to the culminating excellence seen in *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff;* but, unhappily for such a theory, the critical notices were not correspondingly appreciative and graduating. Verdi was wrong, always wrong, no good: "lock, stock, and barrel" he had to be dismissed as worthless and hopeless. A slow unfolding of the composer's musical

manner and method, together with a corresponding recognition from his critics, would be understandable enough; but we do not get this. Our study of the critical processes leaves us with the conviction that he was knocked about like a tennis ball. Little wonder that the critic of the *Illustrated London News* felt constrained, on behalf of the maltreated, half-murdered man, to call "fair play." Then, much that was written was as contradictory as are scientific negatives and positives; while we all know that prophetic warnings and predictions alike have been singularly belied. *This* opera would not "live," and *that* was the worst of even Verdi's worst operas, yet to-day such compositions are amongst us, and being listened to with delight! We have demonstrated, we hope, beyond doubt how in the case of *Rigoletto* — one instance that will suffice— an opera was one day declared to be without merit, only to be held up subsequently by the same journal as a sample of musical excellence.

It is inconceivable that there were no signs, no glimmerings, no foreshadowings in early years, nor during Verdi's Second period,

of that great genius which has given us an *Aïda* and a *Falstaff*, two grand classic works as far removed as fire and water in their tragedy and comedy, as well as in their eastern and western colouring and flavour. Could the critics really see no great future awaiting the man who wrote *Ernani*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, and *La Traviata?* Was there no promise of that store of art to be opened to us in Verdi's Third period works? Was there not a veritable rough diamond here, awaiting only to be shorn of its excrescences, and subjected to the lapidary's art to become a precious jewel? Did not the genius of the great operatic composer exist in embryo, while Verdi was taking the lower rungs of the artistic ladder? Was there not the making of a rare son of art in one who could rouse the popular enthusiasm as this Italian was doing? Did the public on all sides clamour and acclaim, pack and squeeze themselves, and listen with pent up wonder and surprise, all after nothing? Dozens of such pertinent questions could be put in respect to the relations of many of the public and critics towards Verdi.

Our views concerning musical criticism

have been expressed.[1] Among all the qualities however, necessary to him deserving to rank as a capable critic, is one which he should be called upon to exercise more frequently than any other, viz., the power of detecting what is good in a man; and that *instanter*. Make, not break, should be, but is not, the motto for every censor entrusted with the power of the press-pen. In the case of Verdi, it was war to the knife. *Delenda est Carthago* went forth, and Carthage *must* be destroyed. But it wasn't. The criticism which for the most part was meted out to Verdi rarely ever contained a sentence of encouragement, but instead, the man who was some day to become the wonder and admiration of the entire musical world was hooted and howled at as should be an impostor. Many a man would have taken refuge behind the shelter of an undisturbed mediocrity, but somehow, the critics could not scotch this species-specimen. Verdi went on in his way, and the censors who abused, went theirs; with what result we know to-day. The critics are silenced and Verdi reigns, musically, *in excelsis*.

How the late Mr. Chorley and Mr. Davison

[1] *Phases of Musical England* (Crowest), p. 22.

—these particularly—could trace so little of the good promise in Verdi surpasses our comprehension. They were men of the highest integrity and attainments, and purposed injustice would furnish the most foolish of explanations of the situation. Verdi had the great public of this and of other countries on his side, however, and on this he was content to rely. Public opinion once again proved to be right, and Verdi now stands vindicated. Happily both the *Times* and *Athenæum* have long since ceased to oppose the master. The critics of these journals and those of other English newspapers now fall down and worship Verdi—and well they might!

This aspect, this experience of the composer's career is not without its lessons. It shows that we must not judge of a man or of his work by what we read only; that individual culture and practical knowledge provide the best key wherewith to unlock the door of every repository of science and art; but, chiefly, does it prove that no amount of adverse criticism or opposition can, or should, be permitted to bar the way to that goal of high excellence which every earnest worker with an honest conviction and high purpose before

him has every right to persevere towards, no matter what the difficulties, until his fullest realisations have been attained. In this respect, Verdi's experience supplies a splendid all-time lesson.

CHAPTER XI

EFFECT UPON AND PLACE IN OPERA

Origin of Opera—Melody in music—The first opera, *Dafne*—Monteverde's advances—Early opera orchestration—Gluck's reformed style in *Orfeo* and *Alceste*—A complete structure—Verdi's starting point—Wagner's methods—Verdi's early operas—*Don Carlos* and an altered style—Its reception—A Third, or matured period method—Its characteristics—*Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*—Verdi's disciples—Opera as a social need past and present—Its reasonable decline—Verdi's ultimate position—His lasting works.

To perfectly understand Verdi it is necessary to know something of the origin and development of opera, both as a form and an institution.

The Italian school of music had been a power since 1480-1520, when Pope Julian II. invited Belgian, or Netherlands school, musicians to Italy to take charge of its musical affairs. The first distinguished Italian master was Festa (*d.* 1545), remarkable for that grace and melody which have

ever characterised the Italian school. Palestrina (1514-1594), *Magister puerorum* at St. Peter's, Rome, followed, and then came the awakening of opera. It was natural that this life should spring from Italy. The sky above, and the earth beneath, constituted a rare cradle of art. Melody in music is paramount; technically it forms the wings that give flight to every movement; without it, music would be a helpless mass, unendurable to consider. Once present, melody carries all before it. This was a perfectly natural growth in Italy, more so than it has ever been found to be in any other country, for the national life, habits, language, and physical conditions all favoured an expression of the mind in the melodically beautiful. In opera, melody was ever the great essential feature in the eyes of the Italians, and although there have been struggles to dislodge, or depose it, the evening of Verdi's career—the culminating point in the history of Italian Opera—furnishes the convincing proof that tune still remains the predominant factor in successful dramatic construction and realisation; for what would be the value of *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*, if they had not melody?

Musical authorities accept *Dafne*, produced in 1594, as the first actual opera. It was the work of a few Florentine *literati*, who had banded together as a society, with the aim to revive the ancient Greek dramatic style—in fact to restore the theatre of Æschylus and Sophocles. It had words by Rinuccini and music by Peri. The feature of this dramatic-musical novelty was its *musica-parlante*—a species of monody, or declamation, claimed to be *à la Grec*. Out of this grew "recitative"—so important an element in vocal music that it is difficult to imagine how the art could exist without it. Song, tune, or melody, whichever name we apply to it, might be, and probably would have been, dispensed with, if all the notions and novelties of the Wagner cult had taken effect; but, recitative must always stand as a connecting link between the chorus and other concerted pieces in the opera.

The orchestral accompaniments to *Dafne* consisted of a harpsichord, *chittarone*—which was a sort of guitar—a lyre, and a lute. This meant a scanty orchestra compared with the vast instrumental resources adopted by Meyerbeer, Wagner, and by Verdi himself. When

the second opera, *Euridice*, was produced—this was at Florence in 1600—it contained, for the first time, all the constituents wanting in opera, viz. recitative, air, chorus, and a hidden orchestra.

Opera proper was, therefore, purely an Italian product, which, with all its defects and inadmissibilities, has held its ground for three centuries. If, too, during this long period it has seemed as little more than a luxurious form of amusement for quality people in England, it must be remembered that the great middle class here have tasted it, while the student and amateur have considered and digested the musical stage-play, and found it invested with a noble influence and character that could scarcely fail to elevate, where the ordinary drama might lower the public taste and morals. In Italy the opera is as much the necessary food of the common people as of the aristocracy.

Monteverde (1566-1650) stamped a second period in opera. He invested recitative with greater strength and freedom, and astonished contemporary purists with his audacious orchestral designs. In his *Orfeo*, produced in 1603, Monteverde incorporated every

known instrument, viz. two harpsichords, two lyres, ten violas, three bass violas, two violins, flute, clarions, trombones, guitars or *chittaroni*, and the organ.

It is easy to realise the almost boundless possibilities of music when it comes to be recognised and manipulated as a medium of expression or impression; while many readers will be familiar with the almost superhuman achievements of the great tone-poets in handling the resources of music to this end—the end and aim of all music worthy the name. It was that prince of Italian harmonists, Monteverde, who took opera to the borders of that almost limitless field, where the great melodists and colourists took it up, making a permanent life art-form and a speaking body from the otherwise lifeless art materials.

Scarlatti (1659-1725) impressed the *aria* or principal song, from which time melody began to receive that attention which led finally to its being the principal constituent in Italian opera. Lotti, Caldara, Gasparini, Jommelli, Porporo, and Buononcini, who followed, all gave prominence to the soloists at the cost of the chorus and other concerted

pieces, thus leading steadily up to the great scenas which Verdi created.

Gluck (1714-1787) came with a regenerating mission. A century and a half's growth of opera in Italy had reduced it to a mere exhibition of singing, and to restore it to something of an embodiment of all the arts—architecture, painting, poetry, music, and dancing—was Gluck's mission. His reformed style, as given in *Orfeo* (1762), and later in *Alceste* (1767), certainly justified his demand for reform, and will always entitle him to be called "the saviour of opera." His influence bore more upon the French opera than the Italian, however, and it was left to his great contemporary Piccini (1728-1800) to bring the old Italian model up to the date of Gluck's new style. To this end he effected improvements in the *arias*, duets, and vocal pieces, curtailed the repeats, employed several themes instead of one for his *finali*, all of which tended to put a new complexion on Italian opera. Then arose Spontini (1784-1851), who advanced the dramatic side of opera; Rossini (1792-1868), insisting upon larger choruses and the strengthening of the wind and brass department of the orchestra; with, finally,

Donizetti (1797-1848), and Bellini (1802-1835), whose melodic exuberance simply embarrassed and vitiated Italian opera.

Such, briefly, is the story of the rise and development of Italian opera, which, thanks to the labours of his great predecessors, was a reasonably complete art-form long before Verdi scored his first operatic success with *Nabucco*, albeit it had not many characteristics which it now has. The First period Verdi had no great need to improve, or add to, the structure of opera; what was before him chiefly was the work of embellishing and highly colouring the edifice of dramatic musical art (though we know he did immeasurably more)—a labour for which his rare sense of colour and combination peculiarly fitted him.

Verdi's starting point was where Rossini, Mercadante, Donizetti, and Bellini had left Italian opera; and, but for circumstances quite outside himself, he might have gone on writing operas of the *Ernani*, *I Lombardi*, and *Il Trovatore* type, leaving his later grander efforts, his *chefs d'œuvre*, unwritten. But a great object appeared suddenly in the musical firmament. Wagner (1813-1883), with his train of fads and fancies, swept across

the horizon, leaving unmistakable traces of his passage. At first, content with the old traditional opera—with which he might have done wonders — this vast genius set about advancing and propagating unusual ideas concerning operatic usage and creation. The established forms and systems were chiefly attacked.

In Italian opera, music and melody were the prime considerations. Under the Wagnerian teaching, the full and right dramatic exposition became the chief aim. This unquestionably involved a subserviency of the beautiful in music. With Wagner the dramatic language is the most essential part of the work. In the music of the *Meistersinger*, for instance, he "fitted music to the thought expressed in language so imperceptibly that the latter is the dominant element." In *Tristan und Isolde* is the clear divorce from traditional form. Declamation, supported by music expressing the meaning of the words, displaces all the old-time operatic methods—dramatic *ensembles*, recitative alternated with song, closed and half closed forms, etc. This was a return to the long deceased monody of Peri and Monteverde, and in absolute contra-

distinction to all that the great Italian, German, and French music masters had done. Other and minor notions, such as the *leit motif* (the kiss theme), the ever-recurring phrases that were constructed in order to be identified with this or that character, distinguished the Wagnerian style—a style which it is necessary for the student of Verdi to be able to recognise, because, as we have seen, Verdi is alleged to have been largely influenced by Wagner, although most certainly he was not.

Verdi has written in all some thirty operas, which throughout are largely imbued with characteristics of his country's opera music. This is particularly a feature in such First period works as *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi*, *Ernani*, *I Due Foscari*, and *Luisa Miller*. In the Second period operas, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Un Ballo in Maschera*, are traces of outside influence, Meyerbeer, Auber, and Halévy being descernible despite the composer's natural abundance of graceful melody and charming *naïveté;* an unmistakable art-struggle suggestive of a transition process was, as we have seen, revealed in *Simone Boccanegra*. Verdi could not but have been aware that Weber and Spohr were investing German

national opera with that romanticism which must always be its distinguishing feature. He felt impelled to give more character to, and to get more place for, his own country's opera; he set about imbuing it, therefore, with a stronger emotional element—an excess of that desperate passion characteristic of the southern temperament. Verdi's immediate predecessors, Rossini and others, had never left the accepted path of song after song of luxuriant warmth, suited to the whims and vocal abilities of this or that singer; but Verdi was to revolutionise all this. The chorus—concerted music generally—and grand *finales* were no longer to suffer in order to obtain a preponderance of songs to appease the vanity of the singers who sang them. His first attempt to do so was an utter failure!

It was not until *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* and *Don Carlos* that we see a determined *détour* from the accepted Italian lyric-drama lines. *Don Carlos* was modelled after the style of French Grand opera as formed by Rossini and Donizetti, and became Verdi-cum-Meyerbeer. The result was a failure and a sorry mixture—something of a musical salad, the ingredients of which formed "a poor concoction calculated

to derange the strongest musical digestion." The unadulterated Verdi, with the old familiar *bel canto*, was far better than the adulterated one. Those scenes where the established art-forms had been deserted in order to give vent to orchestral painting or new combinations were unanimously declared to be the failings of the operas.

With the important operas which have adorned the later years of Verdi's life—his Third period works — the master has undoubtedly presented his grandest aspect. *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff* are a tremendous art advance upon anything that Verdi had accomplished before. These are operas which will keep Italian opera alive, if that effete institution can be preserved by mortal means. In these compositions Verdi reasserts himself, and awakes to an altogether new and vaster sense of what his country's opera should be, as well as what he himself could make it. Familiarised as the public had been with *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, it expected, in fresh works for the stage, a more logical and dramatic consistency. Any new Italian opera required merit as a drama, and needed to be something more than a series of pretty tunes.

Aïda was the full enunciation of Verdi's new principles. In this work were discarded such orthodox processes as the splitting up of the acts into recitatives, which meant a gain in dramatic action and continuity in the play. The old-fashioned forms, the *aria d' entratà*, the *cabaletta*, and *canzonetta*, were discontinued for less continued melody, piecemeal tunes, lending quite a different aspect to the complete work. The interest in the declamatory music considerably increased, and all was so welded together that a much more satisfactory and entertaining whole was the result. The orchestration was decidedly new for Verdi, partaking, as it did, of the gorgeous Meyerbeer rather than the Wagner character. There was much picture-painting both in the abstract and the concrete. The evident intent was to paint or colour instrumentally; to illustrate the text orchestrally, and to impart not only geographical, but local, personal colour. This was essentially what the world was pleased to call "Wagnerian"—hence the outcry and the allegation that Verdi had turned "Wagnerite." The fact was, that since writing *Don Carlos*, *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*, and *La Forza del Destino*, Verdi had become more "German-

ised," although the term must not be taken to imply that he was less the Italian, or any the more a copyist or impressionist. His state was owing not to Wagner's nor to Meyerbeer's influence and model any more than to Weber's, but to the ambition of the master himself. If Meyerbeer could employ the orchestra slavishly and make it so important and successful a feature in the Franco-German operatic ensemble, why should not he, Verdi, do as much for Italian art?

Otello was yet a further emphasis. When first heard in London, musical minds immediately perceived not only a remarkable work for a composer full of years, but also an opera which fully confirmed the tactics advanced in *Aïda*. Another opera had brought forth another demonstration of the composer's remarkable dramatic powers, ever developing in each successive opera. *Otello* was, unquestionably, worthy to rank with *Aïda;* and performance after performance has proved this.

As a second example of Verdi's new conceptions respecting Italian national opera it contained much declamation, and consequently less of that purposely lavish and luxuriant

melody, for which Verdi amongst all his contemporaries is most famous. Of so-called Wagnerian influence there was little or none. The *leit motif* and other fads credited to the Bayreuth master, though not wholly his, are conspicuous by their absence. *Otello* stood simply a thoroughly "up-to-date" Italian opera, a species of modern lyric drama by a great master who had seen musical changes going on about him, and had not disregarded them. It was natural that the Wagner cry should reach Verdi's ears; it was natural that the Italian master should give the world a taste of how far the new "gospel" had impressed him. Ever abreast of the times, Verdi saw a deeper and broadening meaning overtaking the lyric drama; and, reserving to himself the right to speak as he perceived, he published *Aïda*. This language he again laid down in *Otello*, a splendid outcome of latter-day genius. The same may be said of *Falstaff*. It completes a triad of masterpieces which ought to breathe new life into the Anglo-Italian lyric drama, if so be the decrees of fashion, and not a dearth of operatic talent and novelty, have not already administered the death-blow to that relic of the good old times.

It is not difficult, even if it be premature, to deliberate upon Verdi's probable place in, and influence upon, musical art. His labours, exemplified in such dramatic-music masterpieces as *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*, prove incontestably that perfected Italian opera, of such workmanship as these operas, crowning the later years of their great composer's life, can be, and is, a more refined art-production than either the most advanced or the least extravagant of the operatic models championed by Wagner, or any other reformer of the lyric drama.

Verdi has a young Italian school of imitators—Boito, Cortesi, Ponchielli, Marchetti, Faccio, Pedrotti, Pinsuti, Mascagni, and others. Can it be urged that these can, or will, take up opera as left by Verdi? Is Italy training a school of young composers capable of carrying on Verdi's work? The answer cannot be given in the affirmative. Verdi is declared to have said, "I can die in peace now that Mascagni has produced his opera." For our part, however, we remain dubious; moreover Verdi never made such a remark.

The issue of the whole matter turns upon quite another pivot. Verdi's labours, achieve-

ments, and successes are unquestioned; but it is the point of the vitality of the institution—the opera-house here—which forms the doubtful feature. Fifty years ago this luxurious appendage of fashionable and not always well-behaved society was a necessity. Then there was no Club-land, and the place for meeting everybody who was anybody was the opera-house. Its "omnibus" box was crowded with "blood," who came not to listen to the opera, but to yawn and chatter. Then was the opera-house the resort and rendezvous of the *élite* of rank and fashion, when an enterprising *impresario* was justified in burdening himself with the unenviable task of steering the difficult craft, assisted as he was by willing subscribers, most of whom could be depended upon to, and did, pay ample subscriptions beforehand. Such is not the case now. All is changed in London.

Nowadays society uses the opera fitfully, and not from a sense of necessity; attending it when so disposed, and leaving the burden of "ways and means" upon the manager bold enough to embark upon the perilous enterprise. The march of time has altered the opera as it has altered everything else, save

the weather and the seasons. The three-volume novel is out of fashion with publishers; the principles of Christianity are being preached and practised more and more outside the churches built for the exposition of such principles; and among other vast changes, opera is fast declining in England and elsewhere. When our gracious Queen was young, an able critic and *laudator temporis acti*, lamenting the then condition of opera in general, and welcoming Verdi to England, wrote—"A better state of things is, however, we trust, approaching. The appearance of a composer of so much originality of genius as Verdi heralds, it may be hoped, that of a new and more ambitious school, whose masters will not be satisfied with tickling the ear and pleasing the fancy, but will seek for the more permanent and legitimate sources of effect."[1]

Nowadays people care little or nothing for the opera compared with the old-times feelings. They are indifferent as to whether it stands or falls. It is not thought worth while to abuse or blame a composer, as Verdi was long journalistically treated after he came here. There are no choreographic triumphs now.

[1] *Illustrated London News*, 5th July 1845.

Such ballets as *Giselle* and *Diane*, with stars of the ballet like Taglioni, Grisi, and Cerito, have disappeared from the opera stage for ever. A vast change has come over operatic matters for the worse, and now that the legitimate drama is established, and the "Variety" entertainment has caught on at the music halls, the slow continued decline of Italian opera may reasonably, if regretfully, be expected.

But of Verdi, apart from this unhappy prospect? Some of his early works, like those of other composers, are getting out of date and declining in popularity. Rarely is one of his First period works given in England now; while of his Second period operas not one, according to certain critics, will long hold ground. The *Trovatore*, the music of which has traversed every known region of the globe, and would be taken up by the masses again save for the attractions of the music halls, is already relegated by ambitious critics to the "retired list," and responsible censors describe *La Traviata* as that "sickly opera,"[1] never omitting to note the falling off in the attendance when it and other purely Italian school

[1] *Athenæum*, 26th May 1888.

operas are performed.[1] Occasionally, however, they undoubtedly serve a purpose, as when brought forward as the late Mr. Mapleson gave *La Traviata* at Her Majesty's Theatre (in the 1887 season), with Madame Patti in the title rôle, and prices were trebled. It is fairly safe to predict that Verdi's First and Second, or traditional period operas will all go in time, but they possess such melodic vitality that it would not be safe to say how soon. Many generations may yet hear them.

Verdi's Third period works, *Aïda*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*, change the argument. They are the greatest and grandest specimens ever contributed to the *répertoire* of Italian opera. In them Verdi has reached the perfection of his art as he knows it, and has brought the musical drama to a point which cannot consistently be passed. It is doubtful whether another Italian composer will ever be found to extend the national opera as left by Verdi in these matured period works—compositions which, everything considered, are more satisfactory, and probably more permanent, because

[1] "The curious falling off of public interest in works of the purely Italian school was again exemplified on Thursday last week when *Rigoletto* was given, the audience being much smaller than usual."—*Athenæum*, 15th June 1889.

more reasonable, than any musical drama that has emanated from the modern German school. These Third period works, by the illustrious Italian, will last so long as there is a dramatic lyric stage, whether this be in England or abroad.

Verdi must ever be remembered for the extravagant ear-taking melodies of his early operas, which have amply justified their existence; but he will best live musically by his Third period operas and his *Requiem* Mass. These compositions must always furnish a glorious summit to Verdi's pinnacle of musical fame. At the same time it will be, we predict, many a long day before the last is heard of *Il Trovatore* and *Rigoletto*.

CHAPTER XII

VERDI LITERATURE

Its scantiness—Restricted scope for the writer and historian —English ideas of Italian opera — English books on Verdi — German historians' measure — Recent English press notices — Foreign journalistic criticism — Italian writings.

THE Verdi bibliography, particularly that in English, is not extensive, a result doubtless arising from the fact that the master has confined himself solely to one branch of the composer's art, namely, opera. Although, therefore, the composer of *Il Trovatore* has enjoyed a much wider popularity than other masters who might be named, and about whom volumes have been and will be written, the confined nature of Verdi's musical circuit has rendered him relatively much less attractive to the musical critic, historian, and biographer. This is the penalty, perhaps, which has to be paid by musicians who find themselves unable, or unwilling, to spend

laborious days and nights in the conception and composition of profound orchestral creations of the symphony and concert-overture type, which, however admirable in the eyes and ears of those who listen to, analyse, and criticise them, have rarely proved profitable to those who composed them, save and beyond the posthumous honour which they may win for their wondrous workers. Notwithstanding the universal popularity which Verdi has enjoyed for fifty years, there is, from the one-sided nature of his work, the possibility of under-estimating his real worth as a master of music. With the tendency among all ranks of art-workers to endeavour to shine in many parts, it is quite exceptional to find one content to do his best, and succeed, with one phase of his art, as Verdi has done.

Italian opera was first brought into England in 1706, when *Arsinöe* was produced at Drury Lane Theatre, and in order to give those who attended performances of it a chance of understanding it, it was rendered with English words! Yet the article has never wholly commended itself to the English people, who, especially in its early history here, were unable

to enter into the spirit of the bombastic, exaggerated plots, and excessive love scenes. Thus it does not, and will not, command equal interest among reasoning musicians, compared particularly with that attaching to symphony or oratorio. Italian opera might well disappear from the face of the earth, so far as English people are concerned; but a similar remark could not be applied to any new oratorio or symphony. Opera *seria* is not in vogue here, not even a national English opera, and Italian opera is just kept from collapse by another class than that which rushes with delight to performances of operas of *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Grand Duke* type. Consequent upon all this, critics have gone on chronicling and criticising Verdi's operatic successes (especially in his later operas) and failures, pausing but little to gauge any relative musical worth of the man as compared with other great masters. It is, of course, not possible for such a prolific indefatigable worker as Verdi was to go on occupying the world musically, if only in one direction, without exercising some sway over the minds and dispositions of listeners. It is the bearing of Verdi's operatic efforts upon

art that has been neglected by the English press especially. The fact of Verdi having been so little amongst us affords, naturally, another explanation for the comparatively scant literature respecting both him and his works. Until the appearance of the present monograph, no work existed that brought the life and work of the famous Italian master up to date, or that attempted to place him critically and musically among the great exponents of his art. To that extent, at least, Verdi literature was wanting.

But to deal with the bibliography that does exist. Perhaps the best work in English is Pougin's *Anecdotic History of Verdi; his Life and Works*, which has been excellently translated from the French by James E. Matthew (1887). Another interesting book in our language concerning Verdi is Blanche Roosevelt's *Verdi: Milan and "Otello"* (1887), which is a short life of the master, with letters written about Milan and the opera *Otello*. The brief article by Signor Gianandrea Mazzucato (in Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*) on Verdi is a valuable contribution to the subject, and is probably the best account of the *maestro* contained in any

dictionary. The last work it treats of, however, is *Aïda*, and although it touches *Otello* somewhat prophetically, it is necessarily silent about that greater work *Falstaff*.

Ritter, in his *History of Music* (1876), disposes of Verdi in less than eleven short lines; but a little more justice, in the way of space, is done to the famous Italian by Naumann in his large, comprehensive *History of Music*, since he devotes to Verdi nearly two whole pages out of over thirteen hundred!

Masters of Italian Music (R. A. Streatfeild), contains an appreciative biography of Verdi, based upon Pougin's work, together with some sound criticism upon Italian opera in general, and Verdi's in particular. A further work in the English language referring to Verdi is Elson's *Realm of Music*, chap. xviii. of which deals with the "Evolution of Verdi"; while in Ferris's *Lives of the Celebrated Composers* there is an intelligent comparison between the *Otello* of Verdi and Rossini. Dr. Parry's *Studies of the Great Composers* omits Verdi altogether, the reason for which does not appear.

French works bearing upon Verdi are—Bertrand (Gustave), *Les nationalités musicales*,

étudiées dans le drame lyrique . . ., Verdisme et Wagnerismé; Fouque (Octave), *Histoire du Théâtre Ventadour* (1829-79),—*Opéra Comique,—Théâtre de la Renaissance,—Théâtre Italien, Verdi;* Maurel (Victor), *À propos de la mise-en-scène du drame lyrique "Otello,"* being *Étude précédée d'aperçus sur le théâtre chanté en* 1887; Noufflard (Georges), "*Otello*" *de Verdi et le drame lyrique.*

The above enumerated writings, and the criticisms which have appeared more or less regularly in the *Athenæum, Times,* and *Illustrated London News,* constitute the chief of what has been published in the English and French languages relating to Verdi. We should not omit to state, however, that lately, especially since the production of *Falstaff,* not a little has been said, if not written, of the illustrious Verdi and his works. Sir A. C. Mackenzie's lectures on *Falstaff* were particularly interesting. Therein the talented Principal of the Royal Academy of Music paid a high tribute to the personal qualities of the *doyen* of composers. In tracing the gradual development of Verdi's genius Sir A. C. Mackenzie asserted that the composer did not show any Wagnerian in-

fluence in his later works—a judgment with which competent judges will agree. The articles which Dr. Villiers Stanford contributed to the *Daily Graphic* concerning *Falstaff*, its wonderful humorous music, and the man who made it, were worthy of the journal and its talented special correspondent; while Mr. Joseph Bennett's tried and trusty pen has also been descried in more than one masterly article concerning Verdi in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Musical Times*. In the *Musical Recollections* of Mr. Wilhelm Kuhe, *entrepreneur* and *raconteur*, are numerous critical passages and remarks concerning Verdi and several of his operas.

Foreign journalism has always been busy about Verdi. Thus such publications of his native land as *La Perseveranza*, the *Supplemento Straordinario* of the *Gazetta Musicale*,[1] *La Scena*, *La Fanfulla*, and *Il Pensiero di Nizza*, with the Spanish journal, *Cronica di la Musica*, abound in criticisms and notes respecting the master. Much excellent critical matter relating to Verdi and his works will be found, too, in the French journals, *Le Ménestrel*, *La Nazione*, *La France Musicale*, *Journal des Debats*, and *Figaro;* while he has

[1] 27th November 1889.

been far from neglected by the German press, in such papers as the *Neue Berliner Musik Zeitung*, and others.

The most important and valuable writings respecting Verdi, however, are, as might be expected, in the Italian language. Among these are—

Sketches of the Life and Works of Giuseppe Verdi (Bermani), 1846; *Studies upon the Operas of Giuseppe Verdi* (Basevi), 1859; *Biographical Notes on Giuseppe Verdi, followed by brief analyses of "Aïda" and the "Requiem Mass"* (Perosio), 1875; *Critical Musical Essay on "Aïda"* (Pẽna y Gõni), 1875; *Considerations on the actual State of Musical Art in Italy, and the artistic Importance of "Aïda" and the "Requiem Mass"* (Sassaroli), 1876; *Verdi and his Operas* (Monaldi), 1877.

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